DECEMBER 1937

10¢

Romantic Range

THE HEART OF THE WEST

"See here, Miss Teacher, this ain't no reception—"

THE PECOS BELLE

By

Sally Noon Burrell

Panic Loomed...The Show Went On!

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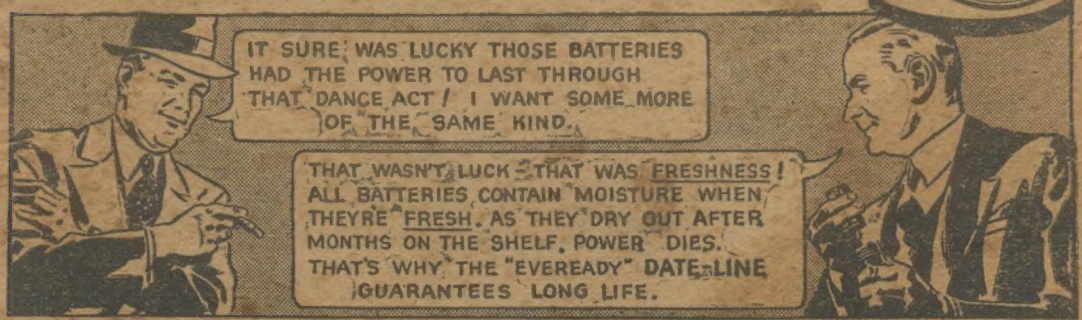
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Romantic Range

The Heart of the West

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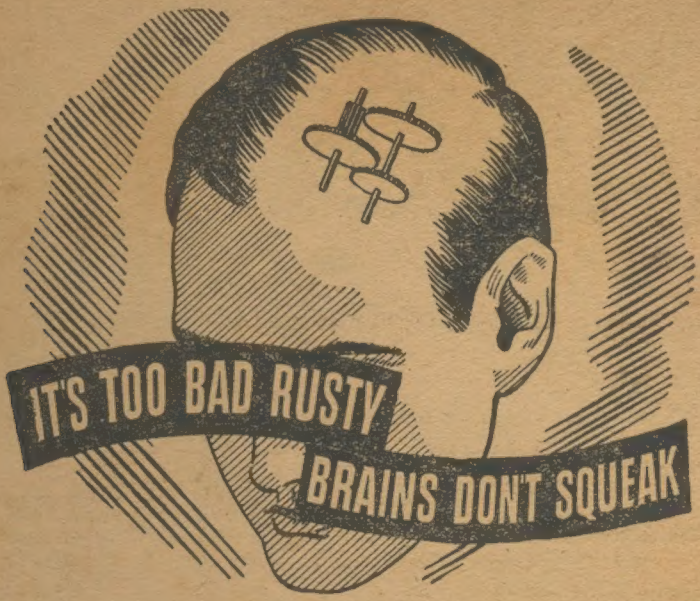

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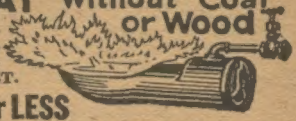

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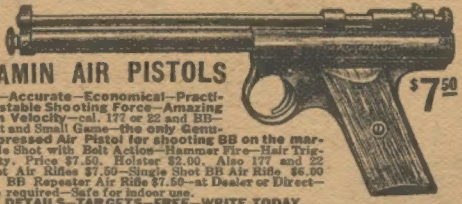

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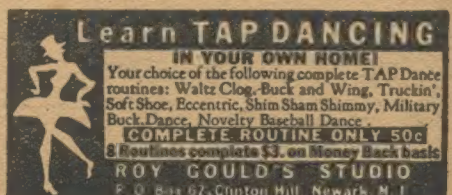
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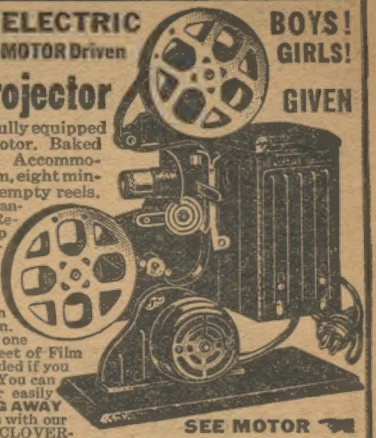

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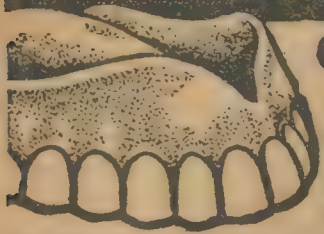

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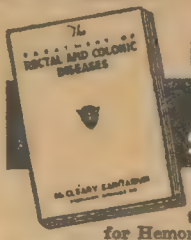

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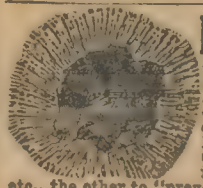

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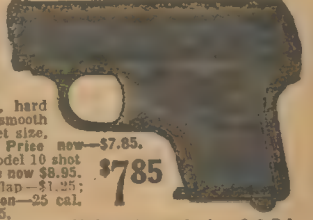

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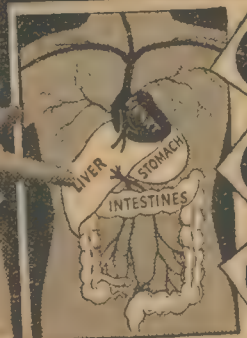

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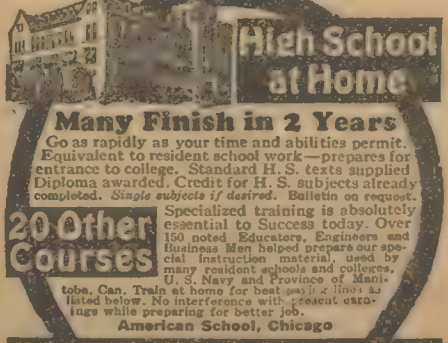

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The Wild and the Tame

Suddenly the air was rent by the blood-curdling screams of a cougar—then the clear sweet ring of feminine laughter——

TWO COWBOYS, saying little, jogged along on sprightly horses up the rolling foothills of Satan's Sentinel. They were still more than two miles from the thick timber that girded the lower half of the mountain. One of the men squinted at the bald, broad rock that jutted skyward above the green forest.

"Ever see any snow stick up there, Bryce?" he asked.

Bryce Yeo, owner of the Y-Plus, elevated his bronzed chin. "No," he replied, peering around at the gray sky. "But those canyons below will be chock-full by morning."

Although Autumn was done with her annual painting job, only a touch of color showed here and there among the thick evergreens that clung to the mountain. The grasslands of the Y-Plus spread as far as the eye could reach across the undulating distance, and upon these Autumn had laid her brown brush.

"Last chance at the bangtails," Bryce said.

His companion, "Squints" Buckbush, whose ancestry ran back to the Cheyennes, swept his right hand in an easy gesture toward the peak and his left toward the west, where already the Cascades lay weighted under twenty feet of snow. His grinning face, however, was turned full upon his employer, and pal since childhood.

"Bangtails?" he asked.

His black eyes were barely visible because of his habit of nearly shutting his lids when he was either amused or angry.

"Well, that golden stallion, then!" Bryce said. "But I can tell you, Mr. Squints Buckbush, Esquire, that I

A Novelette

by Ryder Sage

"Now, you fools, if you'll look around I'll make the introductions!"

could mighty handsomely use the money those bangtails will bring at the dog-meat factory in Portland."

"Sure," agreed the grinning Squints. "Seeing as how you're so land poor already."

Bryce chuckled. With nothing more than his horse and saddle as a starter, he had carved out the noted Y-Plus, which was only a few acres in the beginning but which, under his skillful guidance, had absorbed all the adjacent ranches, until, at twenty-seven, the horizons were his boundaries. All except Satan's Sentinel, which belonged to the government and was occupied by a squatter—Tonder Jossund, an eccentric old man who had sent word to Bryce to confine his wild-horse chasing to the Y-Plus.

That was the one thing that Tonder Jossund should not have done. The next morning Bryce Yeo was chasing bangtails all over the mountain; that is, all over the lower, accessible part. Aside from the small money involved, bangtail chasing had been a cow-puncher's sport in this nook of the world for half a century and—well, Satan's Sentinel was government range anyhow. That Tonder Jossund should assume kingship over the peak galled like a sweaty saddle blanket.

And before that sore healed, two of Bryce's men, who were hazing stray yearlings out of the brush far up one side of the peak, were surrounded by Mort Mazor's imported thugs and sent home without their guns.

That was yesterday.

MORT MAZOR and Bryce Yeo had each, for a long time, claimed the peak by right of homestead. But the government had done nothing concerning the claims of either. Mazor owned huge sections of country to the west and had been at odds with the world ever since some dozen head of cattle belonging to the Y-Plus and surrounding ranches were discovered in his loading chutes over on the Mountain Pacific

Railroad. He was especially at odds with the Y-Plus, for Bryce was the man who had made the discovery.

But it wasn't the mere act of Mazor's disarming two Y-Plus cowpunchers and ordering them off the mountain that irked the owner of the Y-Plus. It was the words that Mort Mazor used: "Tell Bryce Yeo the next time I catch any Y-Plus trespassers on my mountain, I'll put a bullet in 'em!"

His mountain!

So, to-day, Bryce Yeo and his foreman, Squints Buckbush, were hunting bangtails. If the wild horses happened to flee up Satan's Sentinel, as they always had before, Bryce Yeo and his foreman, Squints Buckbush, would just naturally chase them up Satan's Sentinel. Bryce had often said that he couldn't see why Mazor was so intent upon owning the peak, nor had anybody else been able to find out. But the fact remained that he was laying violent and persistent claim to it.

Bryce, from force of habit, shifted his gun belt and glanced at the heavy .45 in his holster. Squints, from the force of habit of following where Bryce led and doing what Bryce did, also shifted his gun belt and looked after his weapon.

"You know, Squints," Bryce mused aloud, "before I'm through—before I'm forty, say—I'll darn near own this county. I haven't got much use for these little sleepy fellers who won't work and who don't know a chance when they see it."

"Tonder Jossund," Squints reminded him, "never comes off the mountain to beg from you."

"Yes, I know," Bryce admitted. "That squatter's a queer duck. Must live off nothing—him and his kid."

"Kid?" Squints peered up at Bryce's face. "When's the last time you saw her?"

"Couple of years ago. Poor little thing, running around in deerskins like an animal in the woods."

"Didn't have a good look, did you?"

"Well, come to think of it, no. Why?"

"So you don't like deerskins?" Squints said. "Tonder Jossund dresses in 'em. He's got an Indian girl who makes 'em and—well, after all——"

"After all what? What are you grinning about?"

"My ancestors found skins were all right," Squints replied. "I'll bet yours did, too—I mean if we went back far enough."

"Honest, Squints"—Bryce smiled—"I think you're more Indian than white man, even if you are only about a sixteenth Cheyenne."

"Maybe," Squints murmured, peering at the wild firs, spruce and canyons that guarded the base of Satan's Sentinel.

"This wild stuff—back-to-nature bunk!" Bryce blew off. "Wait till I build the new ranch house for the Y-Plus! Luxury! Everything I've worked hard for! That's when I'm going to dress up in duds that'll make cowpokes sit up and take notice."

Squints chuckled, but after a while grew silent and thoughtful. "Bryce," he asked, peering wistfully across the foothills, "do you remember when we rode the grub line?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on: "When we lay under our saddle blankets by the camp fire—saddles for pillows, stamping horses—and tried to see who could find the farthest distant stars in the Milky Way?"

BRYCE grunted, his mind thrown back to the days when two boys, orphans, alone, took food where they

found it and asked no shelter.

Squints' voice lifted a little. "I never see you more than an hour a week any more. Somehow—well, I'm not kicking. Being foreman for you and handling the Y-Plus keeps me busy, too."

Bryce shot him a searching look. "Don't the comforts of the Y-Plus mean more than—well, for instance, old Tonder Jossund's living like a bear in the woods?"

"Sure, Bryce, but——" Squints shrugged his shoulders. "Guess my Indian blood crops out about every so often." Suddenly he reined in his horse, held up a coppery-brown hand.

Bryce focused on the line of sight that Squints' eyes had taken. "Where?" he questioned, adjusting his large black hat so that the brim fell down over his black, curly hair.

"Direct line with the bald knob," Squints replied. "Half mile this side of the timber—on lookout. His mares are probably behind that knoll he's standing on."

For a moment Bryce searched through the heat waves. Then he whistled. "Pure gold! The most beautiful horse in the world!"

"Not mere palamino," Squints supplemented reverently, "not sorrel, not bay, not copper—pure gold!"

"Pure gold!" Bryce repeated. "And leading a band of bangtails!"

"Dog meat," Squints went on, pretending to be seeing only the distant wild horse, though his sharp eyes missed no expression that flitted across Bryce Yeo's face. "Some woman's poodle dog will sure have fine chawin'."

Bryce swung about in his saddle. "Yeah?" he drawled.

The golden stallion had long been marked for breaking to the saddle. Bryce had said many times that with an animal like that beneath him he'd have his last wish fulfilled. The young rancher had come to the range a scant seven years ago and had since done what older heads had taken a lifetime to do. He had carved a kingdom out of the West. At twenty-seven he was the pride and hate of the range: pride of those sturdy sons of pioneers who appreciated ability; hate of those who, too late, saw their chance of an empire vanish.

"Let's try to get between him and the mountain," Bryce instructed, and, dipping into a small ravine, the cowboys worked their way behind the golden stallion. Several minutes later Bryce dismounted and climbed a small hill, from which he had a full view of the beautiful wild horse, head high and mane rippling in the sharp northwest wind.

"When I get my loop on him," Bryce said, "you want to be blamed quick about popping yours on, too. The last time he chewed my rope off in about three seconds."

Squints began uncoiling his thirty feet of seven-eighth-inch Manila. As they rode, he carefully worked it between his fingers. Now and then he rubbed a hard spot over his saddle horn. Bryce loosened his own rope.

Without warning, the earth rocked under their feet—a sort of heaving up-and-down, backward-and-forward motion. Squints' horse reared, lunged. Bryce's own mount spun about. By the time he had him under control, Squints plunged alongside. Astonished, they watched the trees sway on Satan's Sentinel.

"Another one," Bryce said.

"Probably the Montana shaker gettin' jittery again. Gosh, but they've had a couple thousand or so already! You'd think they'd——"

"Listen!" Bryce shot out.

Quite distinctly they heard the rumbling beat of hoofs.

"Bangtails!" Squints exclaimed. "They're off!"

"Quick!" Bryce shouted, and struck his mount with both spurs.

As he came up out of the ravine into sight of the fleeing horses, he swung his rope into a wide loop. Less than a hundred yards away, surrounded by his mares, the golden stallion charged for the ragged edge of the forest.

Both cowboys rode at an angle to cut them off. Somewhere among those trees would be a trail over which the stallion would lead his band. His course was as straight as an arrow.

A waist-high stretch of grass slowed the bangtails, and Bryce and Squints, still unhampered, closed in.

"Yippe-yi!" Bryce shouted, and swung his loop in a wild arc. Ten feet closer and he would——

"Yippe-yi!" Squints shrieked, kneeing his mount to one side for the follow-up toss.

THEY rode hard then, and silently. They set their spurs in the ribs of their laboring mounts. Success depended upon these next few seconds. Their eyes focused on the golden stallion who now ran head down. Only every few lunges could they see him in the billowing dust.

Bryce drew his loop a little smaller, afraid that he wouldn't have enough length for the throw. He stood in his stirrups, so that he could have a better view over the bobbing heads of the mares.

"Here goes!" he shouted and—his arm stopped as if some one had gripped it. His loop wilted, fell against his side. He sat back limply in his saddle, and his large blue eyes bulged.

Squints grunted, involuntarily reined in. The wild horses plunged on up the steep shoulder of the mountain, the golden stallion, head now thrown high, squealing defiance.

It was not the sight of the magnificent animal that struck them with awe, though well it might. It was not the encircling mares, their bushy tails stiffened out behind like rudders. Bryce muttered as he stared, and his mount took advantage of the opportunity to jolt into a walk. Squints alone had presence of mind enough to halt entirely.

"Hell's fire!" Bruce spat out.

Squints grunted again.

Voiceless, then, they stared at the golden-haired, skin-clad girl who rode the wild stallion's back as if she were part of the animal. She wore a jacket of tawny cougar hides, away from which streamed her lovely hair. Her trousers, ornamented down the sides with purple fringe, were of soft, gray doeskin. Her hair—her crowning glory—was almost the exact shade of the golden stallion.

She had thrown but one glance their way. In that instant Bryce saw that her eyes were as blue as his own. She had opened her mouth to hurl a single wild scream into the stallion's ears, but Bryce had taken a lasting impression of the beautiful curve of her lips and the flashing white teeth behind.

The wild horses vanished in the forest. Bryce turned to find Squints grinning at him. For nearly a minute they stared into each other's eyes. Squints began to laugh.

"It can't be," Bryce reasoned, "but I saw it."

"What next?" Squints asked.

Bryce gave him a queer look and rode slowly on up the mountain, along the dying dust trail of the bangtails. Chuckling, Squints followed.

II.

A FEW MINUTES LATER they entered the forest over the trail the stallion had borne the girl and his thundering mares. A short length of thick trees overlapped the trail. Suddenly a clearing appeared. They rode across this barren ground and paused before several ravines which led up the mountain.

Listening, Bryce said, "Don't hear 'em."

"Which way do you think, Bryce?"

"Even bet. Ground too hard to tell, but let's try the one straight ahead."

With Squints closely following, he rode up the narrow defile. The tree branches interlaced in front of them. They had to fend them off with their forearms held in front of their faces. The farther they rode the darker the shadows grew. Still there was no sign of the fleeing bangtails, or the golden stallion and the golden girl. It was as though they had disappeared into the impassable thickets of thorns that now began to fill in wherever a spruce or a fir had not grown.

"Do you believe in spirits?" Bryce asked.

"My ancestors did—both kinds." Squints grunted.

As if to answer the question himself, Bryce's horse suddenly stopped and threw his head high. He snorted and sidled off the trail. Bryce growled and touched him with a spur. The animal tried to spin about, but Bryce held him so tightly on the reins that he began to back up.

"Now what?" Bryce grumbled, as the horse crashed into Squints' mount.

"Spirits, maybe." Squints grinned. "That's what you were sayin', wasn't it?"

"Aw, go chase an earthquake!"

Less than a dozen steps forward, the horses stopped abruptly. They refused to go on. Exasperated, and seeing a clear trail ahead, the cowboys concentrated their attention upon hearing. Leaves crunched underneath the restless horses. Bryce plucked an autumn-red leaf and began to chew its pungent stem.

That was when the air was rent by the bloodcurdling scream of a cougar. Bryce's horse swung around before he could stop him, and an instant later both he and Squints were bouncing high in their saddles, as their mounts, out of control, plunged down the mountain. It took more than a hundred yards of hard handling to bring the beasts to a halt.

The cowboys were still saying things to themselves and to the forest in general, when the clear ring of feminine laughter drifted down to them. The voice was silvery and melodious, and its owner was genuinely and thoroughly amused. There was no mistaking that.

"Well, I'll just be damned!" Bryce Yeo exploded.

"Umph!" grunted Squints Buckbush. His eyelids narrowed to mere slits, and a peculiar smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"I'm going back!" Bryce snapped. "And if this fool horse can't stand cougar calls and"—he swung his mount around with an angry jerk of the rein—"can't stand cougar cats and women, I'll go on afoot! I may fail after two years to capture one gold studhorse, but one wild pussycat's not going to stop me from going up that trail!"

Squints rode along behind. He chuckled. "You're plumb forgettin' the girl!"

"I am not!" Bryce shot back. "That's who I'm talking about!"

They rode on several yards before

Bryce, still muttering, stopped short. He pointed. "Look!"

JUST disappearing into the thick brush along the mountainside was the unmistakable tawny body of a cougar. Squints came up, and, side by side, they trotted on through the deep shadows. They reached the place where their horses had taken fright and paused there for a brief survey. Bryce nudged his horse. The animal went on reluctantly. Every few steps he shied at some imaginary object.

A large fir had fallen across the narrow canyon where they emerged into a slight clearing. They were almost directly beneath the log when a rope sailed down and snapped expertly around Bryce's shoulders. In an instant, his arms were pinioned to his sides.

Squints plunged up, clawing for his gun. But at that moment the autumn leaves that enveloped one end of the log parted and the golden-haired girl stood there. Squints was so surprised that his gun fell back into his holster and his hand hovered above its butt, fingers still wide open.

"Don't try to use your guns!" the girl warned. "Betelgeuse!"

A monster cougar trotted lightly across the log from the other direction and crouched for a spring. His snarling jaws and shimmering green eyes were aimed directly at Squints' throat. Squints' hand dropped to his gun.

"Stop," the girl commanded, "or I will give him the word to leap!"

Bryce, tugging angrily at the tight loop, got an arm free. The girl jerked the rope taut again and with such power that Bryce was pulled entirely from his saddle and fell in a most undignified pile. There was no lily-white, cringing-violet arm behind that tug.

"Now, you fools," the girl said, "if you'll look around you, I'll make the introductions! But first, you there, I told you to keep your hand off your gun!"

Squints, already staring quickly about, lifted his hand. Behind him another cougar, sitting on his haunches in a very satisfied, pussy-cat manner, yawned prodigiously, exposing a mouthful of extra-fine teeth. He finished the yawn by licking his chops on both sides.

"That's Sirius Cat, brother of Betelgeuse," the strange girl continued. "They're the kittens of Carnivora here."

She snapped her fingers, and the very mother of all cougars came out of the bushes behind her. The giant female cat rubbed against the girl's strong legs first one way and then the other, finally halting between them in such a manner that the girl actually seemed to sit astride the beast's back.

"Down, Betelgeuse!"

Her command was just in time. Snarling, the son of Carnivora settled back upon his haunches. He appeared not nearly so lovely in disposition as Sirius Cat. But he obeyed his mistress instantly, twisting his muscular neck until his large green eyes fawned upon her.

"We do not want strangers on Satan's Sentinel," the girl told them. "But you come. You defile our solitudes with boisterous laughter and foul language. But you are not satisfied. You burn our cabin. You hastened the death of an old man who wanted to die in peace!"

Her voice rose until it seemed to be nearing the breaking point. With a slight twist to her perfect body, she leaped from the log against the side of the canyon and had scarcely

touched before she leaped again, this time close beside Squints' horse. In an instant she had slipped the bridle from the animal's head and headed him down the canyon. Before the astonished Bryce could stop her, she had repeated the process with his own horse.

"Why, you confounded wildcat!" he cried. "Why, if you were a man, I'd——" He stopped, his hand going for his gun.

He had unconsciously taken two full steps toward the girl when she cried out sharply, "Betelgeuse!"

BRYCE tried to dodge the shadow that smothered down upon him. He might as well have tried to escape the oncoming night. One instant he was stepping back, the next, staggering and falling under the terrific impact of the huge cat.

"Stay where you are!" the girl cried out to the onrushing Squints. "And keep your hands off that gun! Enough, Betelgeuse!"

Sirius Cat slid between Squints and the girl. He yawned. Squints rocked on his heels. Slowly, Bryce got to his feet, surprise and anger chasing each other across his face. Betelgeuse swung around behind him and kept up a continuous low growl. On the log above crouched the huge Carnivora. From below came the echoes of their fast-moving horses, thundering down the mountain. At the rate they were traveling the animals would be home within an hour.

With darting, lightning movements, she swept their guns from their holsters.

"Here!" Bryce spat out. "You can't do——"

She stepped to the side of the trail and threw both weapons far into an impenetrable thorn thicket.

"Hold them!" she commanded the two big cats at her feet. "Come with me, Carnivora!" She ran lightly along the floor of the canyon, under the log, and several yards beyond before she called, "Sun God!"

To the complete paralyzation of the two cowboys, the golden stallion trotted obediently into view. He reared to a halt upon his hind legs. While he stood thus, the girl, one hand lightly in his mane, swung to his back. Within seconds the forest beyond had swallowed them. The sudden beat of many hoofs then told that the drove of bangtails were traveling that way, too—straight up the canyon.

Bryce jerked his head around toward the cougar that had been guarding him, but found that the mountain lion had disappeared. So had Squints' own yawning pet.

"Hell!" quoth Bryce.

"Ummph!" grunted Squints.

"Carnivora, Sun God," murmured Bryce profanely, "and Sirius Cat and—Betelgeuse!"

"Beetle Juice!" Squints spat out. "Let's go home!"

"Huh? Home?" Bryce's voice rose with each word. "Home! I'm going up that mountain and teach that little wood devil a thing or two! I'll——" He stopped, sputtered, blustered on, "I'll tame her! I'll tame her if it's the last thing I do!"

He strode angrily up the gorge, his boots clomping out a rapid tattoo. Squints hesitated. Then, chuckling to himself, he swung swiftly along after his friend, his heavy boots making as little noise as the moccasins of his Cheyenne ancestors.

Soon they came to the end of the canyon, but not before Squints' sharp eyes spied an Indian girl moving quietly away through the underbrush. It was quite evident that she had been paralleling their course.

Over a faint trail, they climbed from the canyon. Here an unmistakable smell pervaded the atmosphere, the smell of horses and—cats! Big cats!

III.

DARKNESS came quickly. The full moon rose red and sluggish—a faint, luminated lump above the firs. It hung there only a few minutes before the swiftly racing clouds glided over its face. One weak glimmer of reappearance—then the blackness of complete absence of light.

The northwest wind shifted due north, and cut down the mountain with freezing temperature. Tiny wet splotches appeared on their faces, and they knew that snow was falling. A stone turned under Bryce's foot, and only the immediate presence of Squints saved him from a serious fall back down the steep trail of splintered rock.

With a howling blast, the north wind changed to a blizzard. Bryce halted. Fine sugar snow stung their faces.

"If you don't want to go on, it's all right with me," Bryce said.

"Beetle Juice!" quoth Squints for answer, and took the lead.

They fought their way through the blinding swirls. The trees began to thin, and they knew that they were approaching the timber line.

"If," Bryce said, "I hadn't already made such an ass of myself, I'd have sense enough to go back. Point of pride, though—— I'd never live down my conscience if I let a woman laugh me out of the woods like this."

They tramped on. Once, when Squints paused to get his bearings, Bryce swung into the lead again, still growling. Above the blizzard's roar through the now-scattered trees, he mumbled about wild girls and cougar cats and golden stallions. He informed the storm and the wind, and, incidentally, the grinning Squints, that he'd set out to capture that stallion and—and he was going to do just that. He'd ride him back down this trail. Furthermore, he'd tame a certain wild girl in the process, even if he had to tie a knot in each of her pussy's tails. He'd be damned if he'd let——

The storm grew worse. Squints' eyes narrowed, and he no longer had a smile. He peered anxiously into the blackness. They came to ground that was more level. Only a few trees rose, ghostlike, snow-covered, about them. The wind sliced bitter cold.

"I've been a damn fool, Squints. Not the first time, either," Bryce said. "I'd feel better if you beat it back down the trail."

"Too late. We've got to stay together. I've been through worse jaunts with you—with less to accomplish."

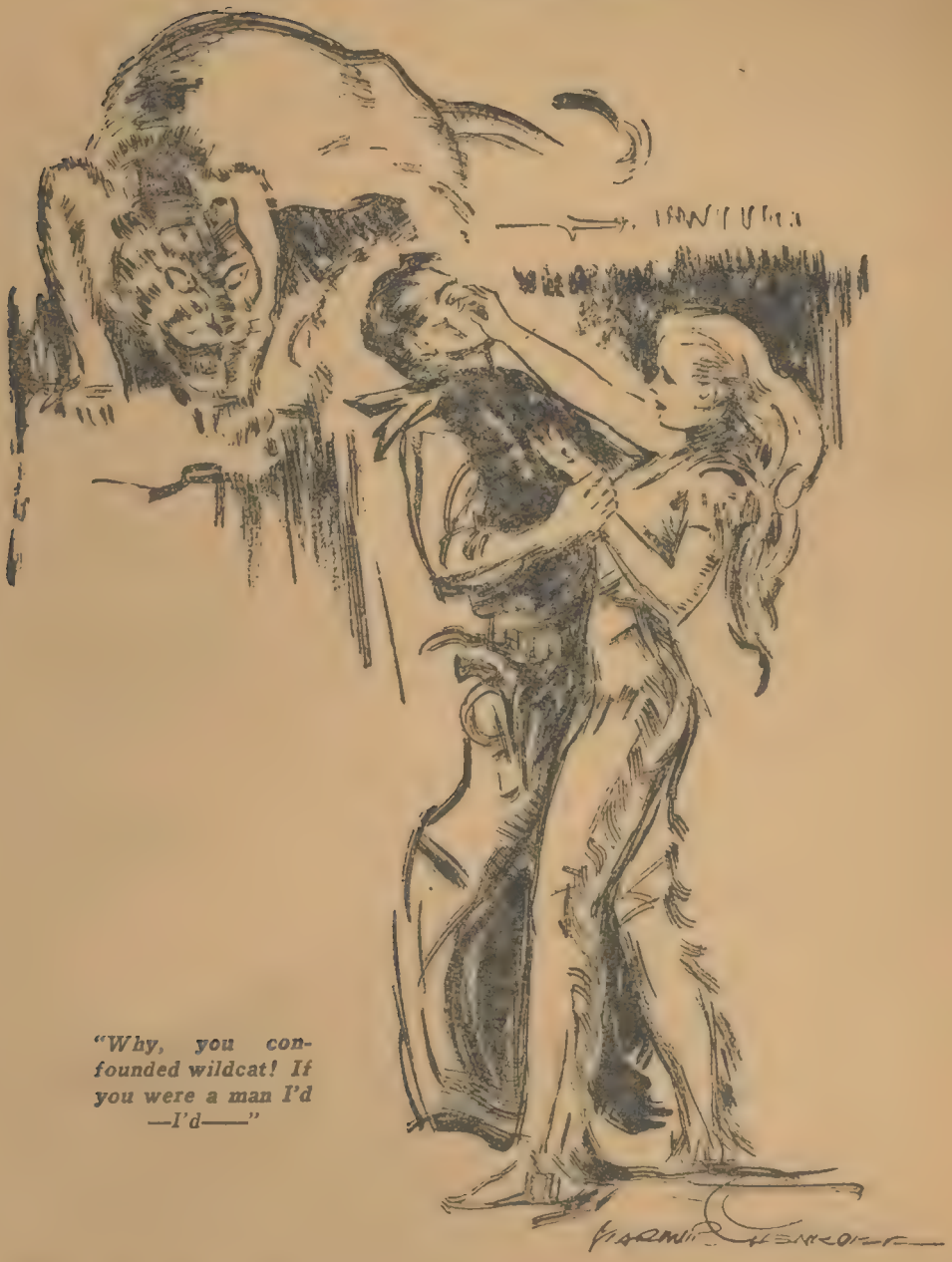
"Suppose so," Bryce admitted. "But we've got to find shelter. I'd hate to die and have the whole range know I did it while I was chasing ——" He shuddered before the blasts and pulled the collar of his blue shirt up as far as the thin protection would go.

"Chasing bangtails?" Squints prompted.

"Hell, no!" Bryce boomed above the storm. "Chasing wild women!"

HE struck angrily off through the knee-deep snow. Close above them, the bald crown of Satan's Sentinel showed white against the dense darkness beyond. Nearly a half hour passed, and their steps grew leaden.

"They had to come this way," Bryce said, halting and turning his shoulders to the icy blasts. "Be-



"Why, you confounded wildcat! If you were a man I'd —I'd——"

cause they couldn't get by us without—without us seeing them."

"She said you burned her cabin," Squints answered.

Bryce jerked up his head.

"And you wouldn't let an old man die in peace."

"Say!" Bryce cried. "What the devil do you make of it?"

"We'd better keep movin'," Squints advised.

And that was true. Already the driving, piercing cold had slowed their blood. Let that cold penetrate

a little more, let the blood stream become sluggish like molasses, then drowsiness and an overwhelming desire to sleep—sleep that would be eternal—— They plunged on.

After several minutes of exhausting labor, Bryce halted. "I smell smoke."

Squints, close at his elbow, sniffed the air. "And mountain lion," he added.

Just then the wild, defiant neigh of a stallion shredded the night. The roaring, blasting blizzard seemed but the murmur of a spring brook in comparison.

"Across there!" Bryce exclaimed, and lunged forward. "Across that little canyon!"

He had taken less than a dozen steps when a woman's scream split the darkness. They rushed around a shoulder of rock and came into a circle of light thrown up by a small camp fire. Before it stood five men, one of whom held a struggling Indian girl in his arms—the Piute servant girl of Tonder Jossund.

"All right, Mazor!" Bryce's voice cut through the howling blizzard. His hands went automatically down to his guns. Then he remembered.

Too late! Four hard-faced gunmen whirled about, and Mort Mazor dropped the screaming Piute girl from his huge, lumpy arms. His black eyes glared through his stiff, snow-speckled beard. He sniffed with his flat, broken nose.

"Let me do it!" he snapped, his calloused, hairy hands falling to his heavy six-guns. "They had their warning to stay off my mountain!"

His gunmen slowly put away their weapons, muttering angrily. The Piute girl rose quietly and glided unseen into the storm.

"I gave you fair warning, Bryce!" Mazor hissed through his tobacco-stained beard.

Bryce edged his feet a little farther apart. If it hadn't been for Squints following suit, his action would have passed unnoticed.

"If you jump me, Bryce," Mazor growled. "I'll shoot you in the guts. If you don't, I'll make it easier through your head. Feller don't linger so long that way, you know."

"Considerate of you, Mazor," Bryce answered. "And what do you think my men will do when they find us with bullet holes in our heads? Sit at home wondering who did it?"

Mazor opened his mouth to reply, closed it. Nobody moved. Snow settled softly about them. Statues could not have better expressed arrested action.

"That's right, Mort!" one of Mazor's men growled.

Mazor's eyes shifted. He squinted at the speaker as if he had not recognized the man's voice. After a long study, his eyes lifted, swept about, fastened on the brim of the canyon fifteen feet to his left. "How far down there?" he asked.

One of the men stepped over that way and replied, "More than a hundred feet."

Mazor sniffed; two yellow buck-teeth appeared through his beard. His eyes shifted to have another look at the canyon.

That was a mistake on his part. Bryce lunged. And while the vow-boy was yet halfway to the man, Squint's lithe body shot past and into the nearest Mazor henchman.

Mazor went down. His guns exploded over Bryce's shoulders. Bruce got hold of the man's throat, sank his fingers into it. He hunched his back to drive them in farther, but at that moment a burly man towered suddenly above him. That was when his head seemed to explode. He felt as if he were on an express train, being rushed toward

a cliff, and then as if he were falling, falling, falling—infinite distance—forever falling.

BRIGHT FLAMES, from a pile of burning logs, threw restless shadows upon the cavern walls. The heat from the fire penetrated with an insistence that made Bryce Yeo wonder for a moment at its power. Not until he had observed Squints Buckbush stretched comfortably on the other side of the fire, and grinning maliciously, did he discover the reason for the potency of this fire.

"What'n the name of——" Bryce started up, but swallowed his words and lay back on an elbow, clawing at the skins to pull them closer about his completely nude body. Squints chuckled and thrust three quarters of a bare leg into the atmosphere.

Bryce glanced at his own exposed legs, then sat upright. He fingered the soft deerskins that had been wrapped about him.

"Got a considerable-sized bump on my noggin," Squints said. "Guess that's what knocked me out."

"Knocked—— Oh, I see." Bryce ran his fingers up the side of his face and growled, "Ow!"

"Reckon you went out, too," Squints commented, and stretched his bare feet luxuriously up close to the fire.

"Who?" asked Bryce, staring about him. "Who decked us out in these cave-man skins?"

"Who do you suppose?"

Bryce glanced quickly at their skin-enveloped persons. "What!" he said. "Not her!"

"Don't get excited, shrinkin' violet." Squints yawned. "When I came to, that Piute Indian girl tossed me this bunch of skins and made sign language for me to change and get you dolled up, too. Our clothes were soaked—what was left of 'em after being shredded down the side of that little gully. And—say!" He rolled over and stared into the farther darkness. "This Piute girl—she'd make Hiawatha look like Old Sourface on the back of a buffalo nickel."

Bryce gave him a scorching glance, but asked, "Know what happened?"

"Your wildcat and Bright Eyes—that's the Piute girl—dug us out of the canyon after Mazor pitched us over."

"So we've got that wild lordess of the mountain to thank? We would! It's not enough that Lady Luck has to have her lead the bangtails out of our reach, guide that gold stud away from our loops, stop us with big pussycats, but, by damn, we just would have to let Mazor pitch us off a mountain and have her save our lives! Bah!"

"It was the snow at the bottom of the gully that saved our carcasses," Squints informed him. "The womenfolks came into the picture later—after Bright Eyes saw the whole thing."

BRYCE wormed around in the three layers of deerskins in which he was robed. "How the devil do you find your way out of these blasted hides!" He rolled over on his other side. "I'm getting out of this hole, and what's more—— Huh?"

Squints was jerking a thumb to indicate some point back of Bryce's shoulders.

"And what's more," Bryce blazed on, twisting around to see what Squints was so concerned about, "when I get my clothes—— Say, where are our clothes? Did you see them——"

"I threw them away," the beautiful, golden-haired girl informed him. She stood very erect, her arms

folded across her breast. The spotted fawn skins she now wore clung to her firm body in no haphazard fashion. They had been planned by skilled fingers.

"T-threw—away—our cl-clothes!" Bryce sputtered. "You m-mean—boots and all?"

The girl nodded imperiously, "Boots and—all."

The way she accented the "all" made him nervous. He glanced across the fire at Squints and laughed, but the laugh was a mere dry cackle. Inwardly he cursed his voice. He swallowed several times. Finally he said, "We'll be getting out of your way in the morning. Some of the boys from the ranch will be hunting for us and—thanks for saving our hides."

"Save your thanks. I'd have done much more for a bangtail. As for getting away from Satan's Sentinel in the morning, if you'll but listen to the storm outside, you'll know that it's not going to be possible for a week or more. The snow will be twenty feet deep in the canyons by morning. You'd do well, both of you, to walk three hundred yards in it." She paused, standing so still that she appeared to have grown magiclike from the floor of the cavern. She went on, unsmiling, "Unless I loan you a bangtail."

Bryce's spine stiffened. His chin ducked back as if it had been driven inward. Squints yawned—a little too luxuriously.

The girl walked, without noise, to a huge pile of wood against the cavern wall and tossed a log upon the fire with such ease that even Squints stopped his yawning, mouth wide open. Bryce stared. The girl was medium height, but in that body lay strength. He recalled violently the pressure that had been thrown against the rope about his shoulders, and fastened his gaze upon the smooth muscles of one bare arm. He lowered his gaze to her beautiful hands.

The girl strode toward the cavern's inner blackness, paused, and, peering back over her shoulder, raised her voice enough to carry most clearly. "My father, Tonder Jossund, was a philosopher, weary of university teaching. He died shortly after you burned our cabin and we moved into the cave."

"Now, see here, you," Bryce said. "That's the second crack you've made about me burning your shack. I'll have you know that I never——" He ended in a sizzling sputter.

THE GIRL walked on, gradually fading into the thick darkness beyond. But when it appeared that she had gone entirely, her voice came back, sparklingly clear, "And my name is Sky. You may wish to use it—while you are taming me."

Only the gentle cracking of the fire biting into the fresh log and the distant moan of the storm disturbed the heavy silence.

"If you yawn again, Squints Buckbush," Bryce threatened, "I'll stuff these damn skins down your throat!"

"I think," Squints replied, "I'll have a look out the mouth of this gopher hole. She may be bluffin' about that storm."

But whether she was bluffing about the storm or not, Squints did not investigate the weather. He was barely balanced on one long bare foot when he glanced toward the mouth of the cave and stood poised like an expectant stork. He sat back down abruptly. "Changed my mind," he said.

Bryce rolled over to peer in the direction Squints' eyes still focused. There, standing like statues just at the edge of the firelight, three giant

cougars stared at them with six luminous green eyes. While Bryce looked, the great beasts marched forward in formation and lay down ten feet away, their huge paws outstretched to the fire.

Bryce gulped. After a time he said, "Folks, we have with us on our right the ever-hungry Sirius Cat. See, he licks his chops, even though he would sleep."

"And," added Squints, "our sweet-tempered old friend Beetle Juice."

"Betelgeuse, my ignorant one, the red star of Orion! First or second magnitude."

"Is that so?" Squints exclaimed, his surprise ascending most obviously.

"And—with her head canted on one side—— Say, Squints, that she-devil's inspecting my throat!"

"You mean Carnivora?"

"Yes. And if you ask me, friend, all these pussies are more or less carnivorous."

"I'm not asking you," Squints informed him. "I'm thinkin' of other things."

"Such as?"

"Bright Eyes. Willow-in-the-Wind! Say, there's a name for you. Just like her, too. Now, if some white man hadn't come along back in Wyoming, I'd have had a name like that, also."

"Yeah. Stick-in-the-Mud, for instance."

Squints yawned and lay back. "Nighty-night," he squeaked through the yawn.

"Hell!" replied Bryce Yeo.

IV.

IN THE QUIET of a pale, cold dawn, Willow-in-the-Wind came and replenished the fire. When the flames were leaping high, she noticed that Squints was staring at her.

"Good morning, horse hunter," she said.

"Mornin', Bright Eyes," Squints returned.

"My name is not Bright Eyes," the Piute girl retorted emphatically. "My name is Willow-in-the-Wind."

Nevertheless, she smiled, and when Squints returned the smile she spun about and ran lightly from sight. Squints angled his head around toward the sleeping Bryce, who wasn't sleeping at all, as evidenced by the one observing eye that bored straight at his friend.

"So early in the morning?" Bryce asked.

"Aw, now, Bryce, can't a feller have——"

"Are you men ready for breakfast?" Sky Jossund stood there.

"Why, er-r, I guess so," Bryce managed, and Sky Jossund stepped closer to the fire.

"Willow-in-the-Wind will bring breakfast shortly," she announced. "Through her I have just discovered that you are not of Mort Mazor's ruthless band. That is some credit at least."

"Not at all!" Bryce's voice was very dry.

"Here's Willow-in-the-Wind!" she replied cheerfully.

Breakfast: hand-pestled wild grains mixed into thick batter and cooked on flat, heated rocks; smoked venison; strange, sweet herb tea and tasty roots.

"It appears that you need no aid from any one," Bryce said.

"We are self-sufficient," Sky replied. "We tired of the pace called progress; that was many years ago. We have been happy ever since—once we ceased to strive always for more and more and more."

Bryce looked up to see Squints grinning broadly at him. He opened his mouth to give that wanderer of

the ranges an earful of comment, but changed his mind and finished his meal. He watched Sky move swiftly to the opening of the cave and draw aside the skin curtains there. A rising sun shot far into the cavern.

THE STORM had died, but far down the mountain lay great depths of snow, so soft that a man's weight would drop him to a smothering death. It would be days before escape became possible; that is, if a new storm didn't blow out of the north and—Bryce trembled with the thought—intern them for the winter.

"Since you are not one of Mazor's gang," Sky Jossund said, "you were not one of those who burned our cabin and forced us to hide in the cave, where we have lived ever since."

"Thanks!" Bryce's voice was still very, very dry. A cynical little smile hovered about one corner of his mouth.

The girl continued: "The cabin was scarcely more than a requirement to satisfy the government's demand that a home be built and so much land be cleared before we could prove up on the claim. We were going to present ourselves for this purpose in the spring."

Bryce absently watched her fumble with the skin curtain that hung over another opening into the cave. A burst of sunlight flooded through as she swung the curtain aside. Bryce snapped his head about and inadvertently bent forward. There, snug under a broad, overhanging ledge just beyond the cave, was the golden stallion and his drove of bangtail mares.

An underground spring threw water from the dry ground beneath the ledge and gushed off into the snowdrifts below. Beyond, reached easily by the ledge, was a large meadow which wound up over the barren shoulder of Satan's Sentinel. The blasting winds had allowed but little snow to cling here. Grass, autumn-browned, grew rank. Bryce observed that it reached to the shoulders of a pair of bangtails who fed upon it.

"There," he spoke to the astonished Squints, "is why the bangtails never look gaunt after winter's gone."

"And," Squints said dryly, "why they always disappear so easily when they're chased."

"I suppose," said the girl, "that you are always so in need of mounts that you must capture the bangtails and break them to serve you?"

The rankling undertones of her even, incisive voice brought a hot retort from Bryce. "No, lady, the world needs dog meat!"

THE GIRL looked at the wild horses, then back at him. Once again she studied the animals; once more the cowboy before her. Nobody could fail to understand that she was deliberately weighing their relative worth—on some scale of her own. Bryce's blood stream reached the flood stage. His face and ears—even his forehead—flushed a bright pink. He muttered something under his breath. Squints chuckled.

Slowly, the girl drew the thick curtain, and the cavern was once more shut off from the natural stables which the golden stallion and his harem of mares occupied. She had drawn those curtains especially for Bryce's benefit.

"You will find better quarters farther in," she announced. "You needed the fire last night or we would have shown you there at once."

"It's going to look like all the taming that's been done around here wouldn't amount to much!"

Bryce got up on unsteady feet and started to go in the direction that Sky Jossund indicated. But ten feet from the leaping fire he halted. Squints joined him, and for a moment they stared at their shadows on the wall. Slowly, their heads swung to look at each other.

"Lead on, cave man!" Squints urged. "If I had a club, I'd swear to follow wherever you lead. But seein' as how——"

"If I had a club," growled Bryce Yeo, "I'd bounce it on your infernal chatterbox!"

Willow-in-the-Wind swept past and beckoned them into the gloom beyond. Following, they soon found themselves in a large cavity off the main cavern, the opening also covered with skin curtains. Inside were two beds, made of three-foot thicknesses of hay and covered with skillfully tanned buckskins. The Indian girl brought a flaming pine knot, set it against a wall, and vanished.

Bryce shook his head. "Squints," he ordered, "come here. Am I me? Pinch me."

"Well, it's a cinch you're not me," Squints complied, doing the job overly well.

Bryce let out a howl that reverberated up and down uncounted corridors under Satan's Sentinel.

They stood for a few seconds commeeting sourly upon their primeval raiment. Bryce was about to sit down upon his grass bed when he suddenly grasped the torch and held it close to the rock wall. Quickly, he ran the light farther along, peering intently.

"Squints!" he called.

Squints rushed over.

"Hold this torch!"

Bryce dug his thumb nail into the rock, holding his other hand to catch the diggings. Finally, he put his palm beneath the flickering torch. Squints bent over closely.

"Holy smokes!" he cried. "Silver!"

For five minutes they searched about the walls. Everywhere they found the precious metal. Untold wealth lay exposed to their gaze.

"No wonder," Bryce said, "Mort Mazor didn't want anybody on 'his' mountain!"

NOON and more strange food.

"Holds a feller, though," Squints said.

Bryce stared out through the mouth of the cavern. Already the bright sun of the morning had given way to high-riding clouds. If those mists thickened, lowered, a good rain would wash the snows from the canyons.

Through the passageway to the wild-horse ledge, Bryce saw Sky Jossund petting Sun God, the golden stallion, who obeyed her every command. Several of the little scraggy mares came near. Sun God bit at them jealously to drive them away from his mistress.

"Sun God!" the girl stormed. "Behave!"

And Sun God behaved. Sky ordered him to move on. He moved on—reluctantly. The scraggy little mares edged up and nuzzled Sky with their noses. She put an arm around one on each side of her and butted heads with the third in front. Later, she went from them to the others, calling each by a pet name—strange names. Bryce heard her murmur Orion, Pole Star, Great Bear, Nebula, Castor and Pollux. He couldn't remember any more. At last the girl popped the cupped palms of her hands together and cried, "Feed!"

Sun God whirled about and ran close beside her. The mares scattered, but jerked their heads up expectantly. Sky flung herself upon the golden stallion's back and pressed her strong legs into his muscular sides. With her hair flying—hair as golden as the stallion's mane—she shot like a bolt from the cave ledge across the meadow. Occasionally, splotches of snow burst from beneath them as if it had been bombed. The mares, squealing like insane prehistoric devils, raced wildly in pursuit.

Bryce rushed to the opening that he might see better, and Squints quickly joined him. Sky crashed from the meadow over a small snow bank and up an almost vertical trail—a passage swept free of snow by the winds off the bald crown of Satan's Sentinel. For an instant, the stallion seemed to cling to a sheer wall. But the poise was for an in instant only. The next movement the stallion was wheeling from sight around the upper rim of the wind-swept rock.

"I suppose she knows where she's going," the astounded Bryce asked of the Indian girl.

"Yes," she replied. "There is a protected meadow on the other side of the peak where the winds will have kept off the snow. The summer sun did not touch the grass there more than a few hours of the day, so the grass is still green."

The clouds thickened slowly, and Bryce groaned with dismay when the sun wormed behind them at sunset.

"If the winter is long, there being four to feed instead of two, bangtail meat may become a delicacy," Willow-in-the-wind said.

Squints' eyelids drooped. "Ugh!" he remarked.

Bryce swung about and kicked a chunk of wood into the fire.

"Good night, horse hunter!" The Indian girl said to Squints as she went out. She walked rapidly to her own quarters.

"You don't suppose," Squints asked, "she's having a little fun at our expense?"

"Oh, no!" Bryce sizzled. "Hell, no!"

He swung angrily off to the "Silver Room," as they now dubbed their quarters. "For a thin dime," he said, "I'd rip these hides off and get——"

"Got no dime." Squints chuckled. "But if you'll wait till I mine the silver, I might——"

He found himself talking to no one. Bryce had gone to bed.

V.

AT THEIR sunrise meal, Bryce was surprised to find Sky come close beside him. She sat down without a word and nibbled quietly at a handful of dried blueberries. He tried quickly to think back what he had just been talking about to Squints, who, hunger satisfied with a piece of jerked venison, was dreaming before the fire with one eye and watching Willow-in-the-Wind with the other.

"It will rain to-night," Sky said.

Bryce twisted about and studied her beautiful face, her lovely hair, the power and sweetness of her lips. Their eyes met, cold blue against cold blue. He was the first to look in another direction. When he glanced back, she was still looking at him. He knew then that something queer had happened to him, that he was never to be the old Bryce Yeo of the great acres that lay as far as the eye could see from horizon to horizon. Something had gone from him; something come in. Nor was he regretful of that replacement.

He did not call it by name. Neither did Sky Jossund, who got up and walked to the mouth of the cavern, where she stood looking out over his lands. What she was thinking, only she would ever know.

Willow-in-the-Wind paused by the fire. She put things in order there with a deftness that only a plainsman would observe—or another Indian—or Squints Buckbush, descended from the Cheyennes. The girl went out to care for a motherless bangtail colt, which Sky had penned behind a two-section rail fence butted against the inner side of the ledge. Squints followed.

It rained that night.

AND when the morning came Bryce prepared to leave. Squints stood near the entrance to the bangtails' quarters and peered thoughtfully into space. Willow-in-the-Wind stood just beyond. She smoothed back her raven-dark hair and appeared to be oblivious of

Squints' presence. But every now and then she shot a swift glance in his direction.

Sky Jossund brought a bundle and tossed it carelessly at Bryce's feet. "Your clothes," she said.

Bryce gaped. "My—clothes! I thought you——"

"I did throw them away," the girl cut him short, and Bryce saw that she smiled for the first time since his coming, "but—not far away."

"Well, I'll just be——" He started up, halted, sputtered, "Why—why did you do that! If I were a man, I'd—— I mean if you were a——"

"Oh, hell! If you——"

A loud voice just outside the cave brought them both wheeling around. "There they are!" Mort Mazor shouted. "What'd I tell you?"

Behind him were a dozen of his gunmen, all mounted.

"They've discovered the cave at last!" Sky gasped. "They've hunted for it ever since they saw Willow-in-the-Wind trading silver for us for supplies at the trading post."

Mazor rode slowly forward. His men closed in behind him. He squinted at Bryce's clothing and, as Squints edged up, broke out in boisterous laughter. As if this were a signal for all to laugh, the others roared, making uncouth remarks. Squints took two quick steps forward, but Bryce grasped him by the arm.

"Wait!" he cautioned.

Mazor looked down into Bryce's face and snarled, "I told you to stay off my mountain! I'm telling you this time that there won't be any snowdrifts for you to land on!"

He twisted about in his saddle. "Several of you men get inside that hole and see what you can find!"

Bryce and Squints spread out a little farther, in order to bar the way. But Sky Jossund said, "Let them pass."

"But—the cave," Bryce whispered protest. "The inside—I mean the silver!"

"Let them pass!"

Bryce stepped out of the way, barely in time to escape being ridden down. Within the cave, the men dismounted and lunged into the darkness.

"Here, you squaw!" Mazor shouted to Willow-in-the-Wind. "Light their way with one of them torches!"

He dismounted. But at that moment he caught sight of the wild horses. To the remaining men, he said, "You fools, get busy and round up them bangtails! And get a loop on that gold stud while he's hemmed in up there!"

Sky Jossund touched Bryce's arm. "Others want the wild horses. You're going to have competition," she said.

"I don't want your wild horses!" Bryce blurted out. "You don't have to rub it in!"

"Perhaps just taming me will satisfy your appetite for conquering bigger and better worlds?"

Bryce swallowed. He noticed the soft smile playing about the girl's lips and swallowed again. He opened his mouth to say something, but a shout from within the cave broke in on his thoughts.

"Mort!" the voice roared. "Quick! Come here!"

Mazor started forward, but hesitated. He spat, then said, "Come along, woman!"

WITH a rough jerk, he almost threw Sky from her feet, but, recovering her balance quickly, she swung the palm of her right hand hard across his face. Mazor staggered back before the blow, but,

cursing, lunged forward—straight into a terrific jolt from Bryce's right fist. He went down, came up bellowing. Bryce knocked him down again. This time Mazor clawed out his gun, and one of his henchmen leveled his weapon upon Bryce at the same instant.

"Look out, Bryce!" Squints shouted, and lunged past. He leaped and came down, bare heels first, full upon Mazor's flat nose. Mazor's gun exploded in the air. Squints bounced once beyond and shot upward like an animal against the side of the Mazor gunman. Bryce kicked Mazor's gun from his hand and swerved out of the path of an oncoming horse.

"Fill him full of lead!" Mazor shouted from where he sprawled. "Don't take so much time about it!"

A yard of orange flame stabbed down into Bryce's right shoulder, and the fingers of his right hand stiffened, then wilted. He swung in close to a twisting horse and got his left hand in a gun belt. Bumping his knee up into the horse's ribs, he dragged the rider back over the saddle as the animal lunged on forward.

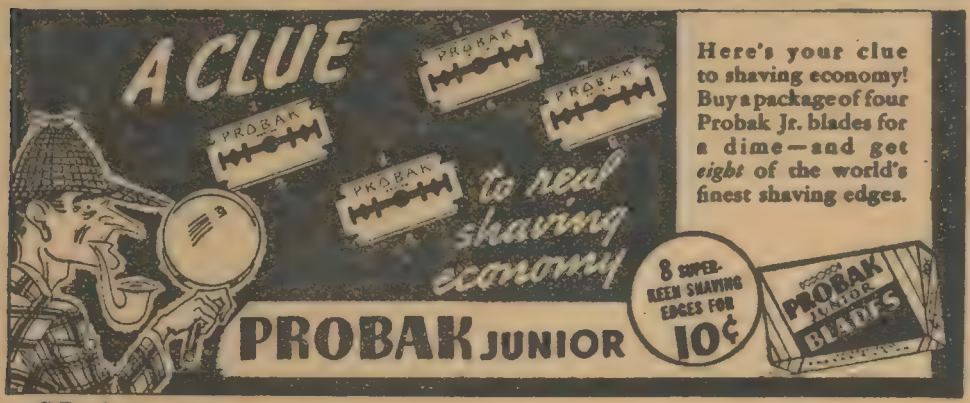
He was just clutching for the man's gun when the feet of many horses flailed across his body. He went down and came up with hoofs stamping all about him. He saw Squints claw a stone from the ground and hurl it into a cursing face. As the horseman toppled sideways, the fellow's gun clattered to the ground. Squints leaped for the weapon, but three guns close above him roared simultaneously, and Squints fell flat upon his face. His body rolled limply.

Bryce ducked a lunging horse. He stumbled to his feet and—peered numbly into Mazor's six-gun. He knew that death had come.

"Sirius Cat!" Sky Jossund's clear voice pierced the din. "Betelgeuse! Carnivora!"

Strange names shrieked against the sides of Satan's Sentinel. Bryce had but a glimpse of tawny bodies leaping from the rocky mountainside. Men yelled. Curses fouled the air. Guns crashed. Mazor's weapon exploded, and Bryce felt a sting of pain across his left jaw. He reeled aside.

Carnivora, jaws dripping, stood over a dying man and screamed the scream of the kill. She backed away, crouched for another spring, her green-fired eyes focused upon Mazor. At that moment, Betelgeuse and Sirius Cat rent the air with their horrible battle cries. Horses reared and squealed in terror. Men were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thrown violently from their saddles.

"Sun God!" Sky's voice cut through the noise of battle.

The golden stallion thundered toward her, swept past her, his teeth bared, his powerful forelegs hammering the air. He gave one fearful battle cry and sank his teeth into a near-by horse. The other animals turned almost as one and fled down the mountain.

BRYCE glanced over his shoulder barely in time to roll out of the way of another oncoming charge. Sun God's harem, heads down, were running noiselessly into the battle, frightful in their silence. Not until they were well upon the ranks of the fleeing horses did their wild squeals stun the senses. The very mountain seemed to shudder beneath their hoofs.

Within five minutes not a single Mazor animal was in sight. Men were fleeing behind, while the scream of cougars and the wild neighing of the bangtails filled the air. And above all this din thundered the fierce blasts of Sun God, the golden stallion.

Bryce turned to find Sky Jossund at his back. The girl spoke soothingly to the mountain lions, calling them by name, "Carnivora, Sirius Cat, Betelgeuse." The great beasts lay down upon their bellies and rested their jaws upon their forepaws. Their eyes still shone with the green fire of the fury of battle.

But at that moment a mangled form rose from the earth and staggered away—Mort Mazor. Instinctively, Bryce stepped forward to keep him from falling, but realized his mistake even before Mazor, having no gun now, whirled and hurled a throwing knife at him. Gibbering insanely then, Mazor staggered blindly into the cave. He grasped a flaming pine knot from the hand of the stupefied Indian girl and plunged on into the dark interior. A roar of mad laughter drifted back out of the cavern, and Willow-in-the-Wind rushed outside to Sky.

Squints stumbled up.

"I thought——" Bryce began, and stopped.

"Got a couple of nicks," Squints grinned, holding one arm with the hand of the other. "Knocked me out for a spell, I guess. Gosh, but I'm shaky! I—just can't seem to—stand—on my fool legs! They won't ——" He sprawled headlong.

With a sort of gliding leap, Willow-in-the-Wind bounded to his side.

"Look out!" Bryce shouted. "Earthquake!"

He grasped Sky by the hand and jerked her father away from the mouth of the cavern. Nor was he an instant too soon, for the cave suddenly collapsed with a terrifying roar. Rocks tumbled out toward them, and a huge boulder came to stop just past the spot where Sky had been standing. A monstrous cloud of rock dust belched from the mouth of the cavern and boiled off down the mountainside in huge rolls. One entire shoulder of Satan's Sentinel seemed to settle.

"That was a big one," commented the grinning Squints, testing out his wabbly feet and leaning comfortably against Willow-in-the-Wind's side. "Mazor sure picked his own burying ground."

"Come with me!" Willow-in-the-Wind commanded authoritatively. "I will stop the blood flow from your wounds."

She led him to a rivulet that trailed down from the spring. Bryce peered up at the bald crown of Satan's Sentinel, where the winds

blasted continuously, where they would blast for centuries to come. His thoughts were broken by a light tug on his arm.

Sky Jossund said, "That wound needs attention. Cold water will stanch the blood flow."

Assisting him, for he, too, was beginning to feel as if his legs were made of rubber, she guided him to a small boulder beside the tiny stream from the mountain spring. She scooped up the water with her palms.

NOBODY spoke for a long time. The golden stallion and his mares trotted back up the mountain, glanced at them curiously and went on out into the meadow. The big cats got to their feet, and, snarling, looked once at them and crept off among the trees.

Sky shuddered. "I have a feeling," she said, "that if I were to call to them they would not answer. They know."

Bryce looked at her a long time. She sat with her head bowed, her eyes covered with her left palm. Finally she smiled. "Wild things like wild things only, and I guess I was pretty wild."

"I still don't understand"—Bryce knitted his eyebrows—"what that's got to do with the big pussycats and the wild nags and——"

"Maybe"—she laughed, suddenly looking up at him with her large blue eyes glistening with moisture —"maybe—I'm too tame for them all at once."

"Hm-m-m!" Bruce mumbled. "Now, that would account for their sort of parting company with you, wouldn't it?"

He put an arm around her and drew her close to him. Her golden hair fell across his shoulder, and her head rested gently there. He bent over and kissed her on the temple, thereafter holding his cheek upon the spot. When next he opened his eyes, he was so surprised for a moment that he had no voice. Below them sat Squints Buckbush and the Indian girl in almost the same embrace. Bryce almost laughed, but then he remembered that Squints had a habit of doing what he did.

But, after a long time, Bryce did laugh. When the others peered questioningly at him, he explained, "You know, seeing as how our duds got buried with Mazor and us having to go back home in these caveman evening clothes, it's going to look like all the taming that's been done around here wouldn't amount to much. There're going to be some smart cowpokes who'll swear we got turned into wild folks."

A sparkling romance—

DAWN COMES RIDING

by MONA FARNSWORTH

—makes it very important that you read the next issue of Romantic Range.

The Darling Little Lambs!

How she hated them! She'd be darned if she'd let that Ranny Mack make a sheep-herder out of her!

NORA gritted her teeth and stood flat and hard on her two feet—so she couldn't stamp them. Because that's what she felt like doing.

"I'll kill somebody!" The words ground out through her nice white teeth. "I'll kill somebody! I'll tear that crazy, grinning ape——"

"Oh, shucks!" Uncle Asa shifted his spine on the wooden bench, and he shifted his whittling knife in his hand. "You make me plumb sick, that's what. You talk like a ornery, light-headed, no-account female. Nobody'd ever guess you had a drop of John Nickerson's blood coursin' through your veins. Ya ain't worthy of yer pa, that's what ya ain't. Them dad-blamed lady-makin' Eastern schools has ruint ya. Ya ain't got guts enough——"

"I have so! It isn't a question of guts! It's a question of—who wants to raise sheep? Who wants even to see the stinking——"

"The lambs is real cute," said Uncle Asa. "And they's money——"

"Cute! Cute! I'd like to wring their necks. The darling little lambs!"

"You look," said Uncle Asa, "as if you was like to blow up and bust with just pure mad. Which don't show common sense. I told ya when ya come out at the time yer pa died that if ya didn't have guts and couldn't take it you'd do better to sell the ranch out and go back East again. But you said——"

"I can take it! I can take anything. But sheep. *Sheep!*"

"Anything," said Uncle Asa, "seems to include sheep in your case—seeing as how young Ranny Mac can't pay you fer that hay any other way."

"But he can! I know he can! He's just doing it to be nasty. He's just doing it to make me eat mud because——" She stopped.

Uncle Asa finished placidly, "—because you've made him eat mud ever since you come here. I've told you time and again it ain't fittin' fer a human female to act so much like a skunk as you've acted to that Ranny Mac since you come home. And he's right nice. He's nice-appearing and he's nice-behaving——"

"And he smells of sheep! I won't have anything to do with anybody that raises sheep. I won't touch sheep! I——"

"So durned high and mighty you'd ruther starve—is that it? 'Cause it looks as if yer choice had sorta boiled down to that—sheep or starvation."

"Oh!" cried Nora. "Oh!"

And Uncle Asa said, soothingly, "There—there—don't blow up again. Don't——"

"If—if I just hadn't driven those cows into that awful dip!" she cried desperately. And, whirling sud-

"Gosh, I'm glad I made you take those sheep! I thought maybe——"

by Mona Farnsworth

denly, she fled toward the corral. She'd be damned if anybody—even dear old Uncle Asa—should see her cry.

But he knew she was crying. And he looked after her thinking how lovely she was and how gallant and brave she was and what a lot of bad breaks she'd had. And then, suddenly, he grinned. "Seven hundred sheep! What the hell will she do with seven hundred sheep!"

But Nora, riding hard across the rolling, billowing prairie, wasn't bothering, now, to think about the sheep. She was thinking of her cows. And thinking of them brought tears of rage and defeat and chagrin, hot and stinging, into her eyes. That terrible dip! And the fact that she had done it all herself didn't make things any easier. If only she could have blamed Uncle Asa. But she couldn't. She'd done it herself, when Uncle Asa was away, and she'd been too pig-headed to listen to the advice and suggestions of her riders who'd come in with the cows to help her.

NORA, kicking her pony to a hard gallop, ground her teeth. And before her eyes she could see again those cows, her cows, all her cows, being driven up the runway to the dip gate, the gate sliding open and the cows, struggling, bellowing, terror-stricken, floundering in the brown, smelly pool.

Nora closed her eyes. If she'd only done it to a few of her cows! If she'd only managed to salvage something from the utter ruin. But no. Not enough had been saved to make any difference at all. That dip! It had been double strength, triple strength—or something horrible. And nobody had told her. She wouldn't let them tell her. So she couldn't blame them. She had gone

bulling along, pig-headed, knowing it all. But even so one of those cowboys might have told her—might have made her listen. But of course she'd made them so mad they must have been sort of glad to see her running her stubborn nose into ruin. Ruin—worse than ruin—complete devastation. Two hours after they came out of that murderous mixture, the cattle were writhing in agony. And those that didn't die of burns had to be shot before sunset.

That was three months before. For three months, now, Nora and Asa had scrubbed along—Nora because it was her ranch and she had to; Asa because he'd grown old working for Nora's father and he couldn't imagine going anywhere else. But all the boys had gone. What was the use of a cowboy when there were no cows nor money to buy any? And pretty soon, the way things looked now, there'd be no ranch, either. Unless she took over—those darling little lambs!

"Damn!" she said aloud through her tight teeth. "Damn the lambs! And damn—double damn—Ranny Mac!"

"For my part," said a voice from nowhere, "I thank you. The lambs will have to speak for themselves. They—— Don't glare like that, Nora. Nothing can make you less beautiful—but it does make you look so unfriendly."

"Unfriendly! Glare!" Nora sputtered. "Ranny Mac—I hate you! I could kill you!. I loathe you! You know perfectly well you could pay for that hay in cash if you wanted to. You're just pretending to be broke and offering me the payment in lambs because you're mean as dirt and because you hate me——"

"Ranny Mac" grinned at her. "Oh, no," he said easily. "I wouldn't go so far as to say I hate you, Nora." His eyes wandered over her lovely face, flushed with fury—tempestuous, copper curls tossing, blue-black eyes blazing. "No man," said Ranny Mac, a grin growing behind his eyes, "could really hate you, angel—not for long."

"Oh!" Nora, unable to stamp her feet, flounced in the saddle. "Oh! You—you—I hate you!"

"Tut," said Ranny. "You're beginning to repeat yourself, my dear. And that's a sign of a very limited vocabulary."

"Shut up!"

Obligingly, Ranny Mac shut, and for a long minute they stared at each other: Nora glaring, sitting in her saddle straight as a ramrod; Ranny Mac frankly amused, a little grin dancing at the corners of his wide, chiseled mouth and behind his clear gray eyes. Nora thought, with a fresh gust of fury, "Damn him for everything—but why does he have to be so handsome?"

And Ranny Mac said, his grin showing through his voice, "It's too bad I can't pay cash for that hay but I——"

"You had no business buying it if you couldn't pay for it!" snapped Nora.

And Ranny said, easily, "I thought I could when I got it and then—things changed. All I can offer you now, to clear the bill, is the value—in sheep."

"Sheep!" exploded Nora. "You can take your sheep——"

But Ranny went on, reasonably and amiably, as if he were talking to a child, "I don't see why you hate sheep so. They're interesting to work with, easy to feed—and they make more money than cattle——"

"Oh, yes! They make so much money you can't pay your bills!

Sheep! I wouldn't touch a sheep if——"

BUT in the end she did. Uncle Asa went off one day and brought them back—driving them in a herd with the help of a big brutish-looking dog that Ranny Mac had given him.

"You betcha I got them sheep," said Uncle Asa, when Nora stamped her feet and beat her little hands. "You betcha. I'd rather nurse a mess of sheep any day than starve to death—which is what you're headin' toward if somebody don't do something. If you'd rather starve—go ahead."

Nora stared a minute. Then she smiled with poisonous sweetness. "And I suppose," she said, "that you and the darling little lambs are going to live on manna from heaven until shearing time, which, I believe, is some six months from now."

"These I got ain't little lambs," said Asa. "They's sheep. Come March they'll have little lambs of their own. And I figure maybe Hank Lawson'll trust us fer supplies till after lambin' and shearin' time when we can pay him——"

"Hank Lawson!" Nora laughed and, mad though she was, it sounded like a cascade of silver bells. "Hank Lawson wouldn't sell us anything but cash supplies even when we had the cows. He's certainly not going to trust us for a bag of flour when all we have is—woollies!"

But two days later when she was riding through Hard River and passed Hank Lawson's general store, he hailed her.

"Hear you've gone in for sheep, Nora." His cheerful, bellowing voice seemed to echo and reëcho down the street.

People turned to look, pricked up their ears to listen. Nora's face, her throat—and her temper—grew violently crimson. She turned to stare furiously at Hank.

He said, "Sorta thought you might be coming by, now that you're gone to sheep raising, and talk business with me. Come on in, Nora."

Nora never knew why she went in. Maybe she was too mad to know what she was doing. Maybe she was afraid he'd shout out again about the sheep.

Hank said, "Ain't you needing supplies out your way? I thought maybe—with winter coming——"

And Nora said, bitterly, "Thanks so much! What would you suggest our using for money? The memory of our cows—or the odor of our sheep?"

Hank grinned at her. "You sound kinda sour," he said. "Which is more'n anybody owning all them sheep should sound these days." And then he stuffed his hands in his pockets, teetered back on his heels and said, "Them sheep you seem to hate so—you can thank them for any supplies you get. Me, I wouldn't credit a chew of tobacco to a cattle ranch now. Not with all the homesteaders plowing up free range like they're doing. Won't be no time at all before there's no place for cattle to feed. Ain't nobody got range enough all by hisself for cattle. They all use free grazing land—and when the homesteaders hoe it all to corn and potatoes——" He opened his hands and shrugged eloquently. "You better thank the Lord for them sheep. Them nibblers can live high on grass a cow couldn't see. So how about supplies? What'll I fix up for you?"

It was too much for Nora. The last three months had been too lean. Being in the middle of the bounty of Hank's store and knowing she

could have whatever she wanted suddenly went to her head. She ordered plentifully, generously, lavishly—enough to take her through most of the winter.

A WEEK LATER she remembered, with scarlet fury, what she had done. And she knew that every mouthful of food she'd ordered from Hank Lawson's store would probably choke her.

Because "Skinny" Wilkins—long, lanky, pimply-faced, snake-eyed—pulled rein in front of her ranch steps and said, "Heard Hank call out the other day that you and Asa'd gone in for raising sheep. Is that right or wrong?"

"Whichever it is," said Nora with cool scorn, and wondering why nature let such lice live, "I can't see that it's any concern of yours. So suppose you ride along and——"

"I'll ride along," said Skinny out of the corner of his slack mouth. "I'll ride along—but first I can tell you this: I'll get your sheep, every one of 'em, sooner or later! I'll teach you and that tea-hound dude to try and raise sheep in a cow country! I'll fix both of you. You and that Ranny Mac——"

Nora blew up, her copper curls flying, her eyes like sea-blue bonfires. "Don't you dare say such a crazy thing! I've got nothing to do with Ranny Mac! I hate him! I loathe him! The sheep-raising——"

The growing sneer on Skinny's face stopped her. "Sheep-raising son of a something, is he? And where does that put you? Ain't you raising sheep, too? Don't that put you and him practically in partnership? Where do you get off, anyhow? Huh. You can't throw no bluff to me." He laughed, a sudden gust of nastiness, right in her stunned, furious, scarlet face.

Then he turned his horse and started off, calling back over his shoulder, "Just don't forget what I said. I'll get the both of you—you and him and all your sheep—before I'm through. Coming into a cow country, you two fool dudes—and raising sheep!"

He was out of sight before Nora got her breath. Then she raced on clicking heels out to the corral, saddled her pony and galloped off to find Uncle Asa, wandering somewhere on the lush grasslands with his herd of stinking sheep.

She found him sitting contentedly under a young cottonwood, whistling through his teeth and completely surrounded by the wooden snow of his whittled stick. Two hundred yards away the sheep looked like tufts of cotton on the green grass and the dog Ranny Mac had given them kept watch with a practiced eye.

Nora, for the first time in her life, hated Uncle Asa.

"You look," she raged at him, "exactly like a sheep-herder! You look——"

"Yeah," said Uncle Asa, grinning at her. "I feel like one, too. Seems as if I ain't never been so happy—nothing to do all day but loaf here in the sun, whittling these little jiggers, and watching that dog manage the sheep. I'm getting to love them sheep, Nora. You know——"

"I know that if you love them it's just too darned bad. Because we're going to sell them. We're going to sell them or give them away or poison them or something!" In a breathless rush she told him about Skinny—what he'd said—what he'd threatened. "And if you think I'm going to be forced to side with that—that fool of a Ranny Mac! If you think I'm going to be shoved into the position of fighting the cattle-

men—— Oh!" Her rage got the best of her. Then her words boiled out. "Wouldn't that make just a sweet picture! Ranny Mac and me fighting shoulder to shoulder! Fighting together for our darling little lambs! I tell you I won't have it! I won't be made a fool of! I won't——"

"All right—all right," said Uncle Asa amiably, "you won't. So what you gonna do? You sell these here sheep now—before they lamb and before shearing time—and what do you use for money to pay the bill you run in Hank's store? You can't get money enough on these sheep now to pay that. Hank sold you all that stuff on account of how he knew by spring you could pay the bill——"

NORA rode back to the ranch house. She was so choked with fury she was numb. And she hated Ranny Mac with a blind and scarlet hatred that seemed to turn her to cold steel. Ranny Mac had done all this to her. He'd done it on purpose. He'd made believe he couldn't pay for that hay in cash just to force her into this ridiculous, absurd, humiliating position as a sheep owner—almost his partner—certainly his ally—since they two were the only owners of sheep in this whole country. He'd known it would humiliate her, disgrace her, and he'd done it on purpose. He'd wanted to humiliate her because—— She *had* treated him like mud.

"Damn him!" she thought. And suddenly tears were stinging, hot in

"Unfriendly! Glare! Ranny Mack, I hate you—and your dama sheep!"

her eyes. She flung back her head to blink them away. And she stopped, staring at the sky. Clouds were piling up in the west. A cold, hard wind was rising. The sunlight turning, suddenly, a weak lemon-color, was unnatural, threatening. "Snow," Nora thought. And then she thought, "The sheep! If Asa doesn't get them under shelter quickly——" her thought snapped, then went on, furiously, "What do I care what happens to the sheep? Let them freeze. Let them get snowed under——" But somehow, all the way home, she couldn't forget that, for a minute, she had thought of them and been concerned about their safety.

But she needn't have been. Because Uncle Asa got them all herded into the corral long before the first snowflake fell. And the storm didn't amount to anything anyhow. But three weeks later it did. Nora woke that night and heard it, snicking against the windows of her room. And before she knew what she was doing she was halfway downstairs, her clothes on her somehow, and her voice, sleepy, throaty, calling for Uncle Asa.

He wasn't in the house. And she'd almost reached the corral, the snow stinging her face, before she realized that some blind, deep-lying instinct must have driven her there, because, as she thought of it, she didn't know why she'd come.

And then Uncle Asa's voice, out of the white mist of whirling snow, was telling her. "Lord be thanked you're here," he yelled above the wind. "Come on in and yank these critters off the pile." She saw them then, heaped up and up on each other in an effort to keep warm. "If they stay that way," yelled Uncle Asa, "the fools on the top are gonna smother the fools on the bottom."

Nora could see that. And she began to push and yank and pull, too cold to give vent to her rage, too busy even to hate the great white lumps of snow-encrusted wool.

"Gol ding 'em," yelled Uncle Asa, "as fast as you unpile 'em they heap theirselves up again somewheres else. Hurry up, girl!" And a minute later he yelled, "Zipes! Look at that dog! He's as good as two extra hands."

But Nora couldn't be bothered looking at the dog. She couldn't look at anything but sheep. And before long she was too exhausted even to look at them. She worked blindly—snow in her hair, snow in her eyes, snow stiffening her hands.

Finally, Uncle Asa said, weakly, "Dawn, girl!"

She stopped and stared. The wind had died as the sky grew pale and, a minor miracle, the snow wasn't the driving brutal thing it had been. "You go up to the house, child," muttered Uncle Asa, "and get some sleep. I'll haul out some hay."

But Nora wouldn't go. She helped him and, finally, they went home together. The night was over. The sheep were safe.

"Damn sheep!" was her last conscious thought before she dropped into bottomless slumber. But after that she found she wasn't damning them so heartily. When you have fought through an endless night for something's life you seem to be forced to take sort of an interest in it, whether you want to or not.

AND that wasn't the end. There were two more bad blizzards, and there was a week of bitter cold when she and Uncle Asa took turns fighting to keep the sheep from freezing. There was the time when they tossed

a coin to see who would battle through the snowdrifts to get the cottonseed cake. The supply had run low and the sheep had to have it.

"Drat them!" said Nora. "I wouldn't go to town in this weather to buy food for us, but, of course, those darling little lambs——"

"If you don't give 'em that there cake," said Uncle Asa, "that bill of Hanks won't get paid on account of how the wool won't be worth nothin'. You get along."

She got along. And got the cottonseed cake. When she came back she went out herself and fed them with it, laughing at their eagerness.

She was still laughing, standing in the middle of her milling herd of woollies, when a voice called out, "So you are getting along all right! I got worried—all this bad weather——"

Nora froze. Her heart seemed to stop dead, turn over, and race breathlessly. Of all the damned luck! To have that Ranny Mac skunk come and find her like this, feeding these dratted sheep and looking as if she liked it!

She stiffened her voice till it sounded like bitter ice. "We've got through—yes. But I can tell you I've never worked so hard in my life. And I've never hated anything the way I hate sheep!"

Ranny Mac didn't say a word. He didn't have to. The twinkle in his gray eyes, the almost invisible smile touching his lips were enough. He was thinking, "You looked a minute ago as if you hated them. You just looked it!"

Nora, feeling the blood surge under her clear skin, said furiously, "A lot of good its going to do us to slave over these filthy sheep, too! Just before this snow set in Skinny Wilkins come over here and——"

"—guaranteed to send us and our sheep straight to hell." He grinned at her. "I know Skinny. He came over my way, too. He's just talking to exercise his throat. We don't need to worry about him——"

But after he'd ridden away Nora forgot to get mad about that "we," because her mind was absorbed with wonder about Ranny Mac's guns. He wasn't a fighting cowpoke. He was a peace-loving sheepman. Yet his guns were fighting guns carried at a business angle. If he wasn't worrying about Skinny—what was he worrying about?

A WEEK LATER she said to Uncle Asa, "What are you cleaning those revolvers for? I've never seen you go around with full holsters."

"Yeah," said Uncle Asa. "Yeah—it's funny the things you see the older you get. As a matter of fact, it wouldn't do you no harm to learn how to shoot. Strikes me that fancy Eastern schooling ain't likely to do you much good unless you learn something practical along with it."

Nora looked at him, her eyes like blue gimlets. "All of which means," she said, "that you've heard something more about Skinny Wilkins and——"

"Ain't Skinny Wilkins alone," said Uncle Asa. "It's a whole bunch o' them damned cattle stuck-ups. They think just 'cause we own sheep we ain't fit to walk on the same sidewalk with 'em. And if anybody thinks I fought all winter long with them woollies—if anybody thinks I nursed 'em and stuck by 'em and fed 'em and sweated blood to keep 'em from freezing, just to have a bunch of gol-dinged know-nothings take 'em away from me——"

"But they couldn't take them away, Uncle Asa! What would they

do with them? What would any cowman do with seven hundred sheep?"

For a long minute Uncle Asa said nothing. He left Nora's question hanging in the air between them, loud as a dangling cowbell. Then he looked up at her. "They wouldn't have to do nothing with 'em," he said. "Not if they found a way to pizen 'em."

"Poison our sheep!" Nora'd nursed those woollies through the winter, too. Something inside of her rose up now and shouted. "The dirty skunks," she said, and hunted until she found guns she could practice with.

Another two weeks and she had forgotten Skinny, forgotten the need for guns, forgotten everything. Lambing time was upon them. And if she thought she'd worked during the blizzards of winter she discovered her mistake now. Day and night she and Uncle Asa were with the sheep. They slept on their feet. They ate on the run.

"If we could only hire one man to help us," said Nora, desperately. "Just one——"

Uncle Asa looked at her out of red-rimmed, weary eyes, "Probably if you mentioned your wish," he said, "all them sweet-natured cow skunks would come runnin'." And that was that.

But finally it was over. Nora went to bed and slept around the clock. And when she woke she found that, from somewhere or other, spring had actually arrived. It had sneaked up on them when they were too busy to notice.

But Nora thought nothing of it until one day she found Uncle Asa standing on the bank of Silver Branch shaking his head. The sheep —some hundred and fifty of them— were drinking farther down. Nora thought, suddenly, that white sheep and green grass and blue sky and rushing water were, taken altogether, sort of pretty. But Uncle Asa shook his head.

She said, laughing, "Why the cloud of gloom, old darling? We'll shear them next week—and then the money'll roll in."

"Yeah," said Uncle Asa. And suddenly his hands were on his guns. "Somebody's in them bushes," he muttered.

Nora laughed at him. "That's your precious pup," she said. "Don't tell me you've got the jitters so badly that you go for your guns when a dog steps on a twig!"

Uncle Asa looked at her. "Smart, ain't you?" he said. "And if you was gonna do monkey shines with a mess of sheep—wouldn't the week before shearing time be the time you'd pick?"

THE WEEK before shearing time. If they waited till later the year's money would be made. If something happened to the sheep now—everything would be lost.

Nora thought that over. She watched Uncle Asa, who watched the road and the corral. And suddenly she had an idea of her own. Poison. That was what Uncle Asa had said. And what would be the most likely way of poisoning, simultaneously, seven hundred sheep and nearly eight hundred and fifty lambs? There was only one way, one good way, one easy way. She knew, suddenly, why Uncle Asa had watched the sheep by the creek. She knew why he had shaken his head. It was the only creek they had. They depended on it for general water. Drinking water came from a well near the house. But the creek——

Nora saddled her pony and headed him upstream. The reservoir, feeding the creek, would be the place.

It was. She heard their voices before she saw them—dim shapes moving in the dusk that had crept up on her as she rode.

"That keg," said a voice cheerily, "will blow up the whole damn works. It'll flood things fer a spell and then they won't be no water at all. I tell ya by the time Skinny fixes up that stinking dude and we fix up little Miss Nose-in-the-air——"

Nora touched guns. She was so mad she shook all over. But her hands were steady as blocked ice. She dropped from her saddle and went forward on foot, noiseless, alert.

A cowman said, "Them pair of damn dumb sheep-herders! They aint got sense enough between 'em to skin a steer. They're so dumb that——"

"Oh," said Nora's voice, sweet and clear, "not so damned dumb as all that." And then she snapped, "Scratch those stars above your heads—all of you! I've got guns—and they both work."

And behind her a voice said, "Godfrey, Nora—you plumb gave me a start."

"Uncle Asa——"

And the old man said, "How come you're up here? I been waiting for these skunks every night since lambing. But how'd you know——"

"Take some rope and tie them——"

"I'd ruther hold my guns on 'em. Then if they wiggle I c'n shoot 'em with a clear conscience. Where you going, Nora?"

But Nora had already gone, leaping into the saddle, galloping down the hill, grateful that Ranny Mac's place wasn't too far away, praying that she'd get there in time.

But it seemed a thousand years before she pulled up before his door, calling, yelling, pounding against echoing wood, wanting to scream in the face of that silent, deserted house.

And then, suddenly, she was still. Horror flamed out of the darkness. Terror ran cold through her veins. A livid glare exploded the velvet sky. Its rumbling shook the earth. Nora, as if pulled by strings, leaped back again into the saddle. She kicked the pony till his beating hoofs flew.

"Ranny!" her voice was dry in her throat. "Ranny!" She knew what had happened, knew it as well as if she'd seen it. Ranny had guessed they were going to blow up his reservoir. Maybe Uncle Asa and Ranny had guessed it together. And Ranny'd gone up there to keep watch. Skinny had come. Ranny had tried to get the best of him—and Skinny had shot him. Nora knew it. She knew it. Ranny was dead. "Ranny!" she sobbed. "Ranny!"

She heard herself sob, heard the breath beat in her throat, heard the thunder of her heart. But she didn't hear the rushing sound that rose and crashed louder and louder.

She didn't hear a thing till somebody yelled, "Nora! Nora, you fool! Where are you going? Do you want to kill yourself?"

"Ranny!" She wanted to cry out his name. But she couldn't. It was nothing but a weak whisper, drowned in the beating of hoofs, the sudden scramble up a hill, the sudden stopping at the top.

"Ranny." Nora struggled for her breath, struggled to stop her heart from suffocating her. "Ranny——"

And Ranny said, "They blew up my reservoir. I got Skinny—but he got it blown first. That's water

down there. Another minute and you'd have been caught in it."

Nora looked down the hill, into the rushing torrent swirling by. And she said, "Ranny—I thought, for a while, you were dead. Oh—Ranny——"

AND THEN, by some miracle, she was in his arms, and his lips, warm, enduring, were drawing her heart forever into his keeping.

But suddenly, through the loveliness, a thought stabbed. Nora moved. Freed her lips. "The sheep!" she said, "Ranny—where are your sheep? If the valley is flooded——"

Ranny looked down at her. Even in the darkness she could see the twinkle in his eyes. "Do the sheep matter very much to you, Nora?"

She flung her head up impatiently. "Oh, don't be silly!" she said. "Where are the sheep? If you've let anything happen to your darling little lambs——" She stopped.

Ranny was laughing. "Oh," he said, "so you love the lambs. The darling——"

He was laughing at her frankly now, a tender chuckle. But Nora had been through too much recently to care.

"Of course I love them," she snapped. "Nobody can nurse anything the way I nursed those lambs and not love them. And yours—where are they? If you've let them drown——"

But they hadn't drowned. Ranny, knowing trouble was coming, had driven them into a valley farther away. He told her this, and then he said, holding her close, "Gosh, I'm glad I made you take those sheep. I thought maybe it would work out like this. I——"

"You mean I didn't have to take those sheep? You mean you could have paid cash for that hay?"

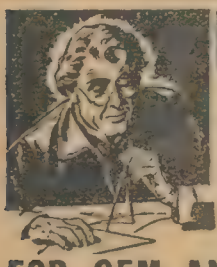
"Well"—Ranny Mac evaded the issue deftly—"I figured it this way. You'd never marry me so long as I was a sheepman—and you hated sheep. But, if something happened and you got to love sheep——"

"You knew if I took care of them I couldn't help loving them!"

"Well," said Ranny Mac, "I honestly didn't see how anybody could get to know sheep real well—and not get sort of fond of them——"

"Ranny! You—you——"

For a long minute there was silence as Ranny tilted her face to his eager lips. Then laughter danced on the air and, the idea striking them simultaneously, they chanted, "God bless the darling little lambs!"



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FAMOUS WOMEN of the WEST

No. 17 in the Series

by Anita Allen

This month: The Girl Called "Captain Jack"

ELLEN ELLIOT JACK, although never an outlaw, had more courage than any of the women outlaws of the West. Actually, Ellen Jack was a dazzling, bright flame of courage—a blaze which never faltered.

And no woman outlaw of the old West could be compared to her for beauty. Ellen was an English girl, so exquisite that men would do almost anything just to be near her.

Tall, fair and slim, her hair was like captured sunlight, her blue eyes deep and dreaming. Every feature was perfectly molded and beneath the perfection was the glowing charm of her fiery personality.

Born in 1842 to a wealthy family in Nottingham, England, she was hardly grown before her beauty had become a legend. Men and boys watched her whenever she appeared in public. There were always dozens of fervent notes in her daily mail and the more daring went to dangerous or absurd lengths to meet her.

But apparently Ellen's heart could

not be touched. She was half amused and half annoyed by the constant attentions of men. Then, at the home of a married sister, she met a young Russian musician. He, of course, fell madly in love with her, and Ellen, thus far untouched by emotion, believed she also cared for him.

Her interest was short-lived, however, and when he discovered this he attempted to kill her. Encountering her at the opera, he leaped toward her with a knife flashing in his hand. Ellen fell, seriously wounded. Rushed to a hospital, she was close to death for a time. But finally her magnificent vitality triumphed and she fought her way back to health.

As soon as she could get out of bed, she left for America with her sister and brother-in-law. And then she actually did meet romance—the only romance of her life.

Charles Jack was first officer of the ship which took the girl to America. He was courteous to her, but nothing more. Other men fought and schemed for a minute alone with her, but Jack apparently regarded her as merely another passenger. This intrigued her, and for the first time in her life she made an effort to know a man. He remained charming, courteous—and disinterested.

Ellen fell in love with him. For as she grew to know Jack she discovered the strength, courage and likableness of his character.

Ellen Elliot took stock of the situation, called upon all her wiles and openly set out to win Jack's love. The feat was not too hard to accomplish, and he asked her to marry him before the ship reached port.

THEY WERE married in September, 1860, and made their home in New York, although Jack continued his career as ship's officer until the outbreak of the Civil War, when he entered the navy. He was then appointed captain of the *Carleton,* and during the Battle of New Orleans was so badly wounded that his heart was permanently weakened.

Ellen waited unhappily in New Rochelle while war madness swept over the land, unleashing crime and criminals upon the populations of the towns. New Rochelle was constantly plundered by bands of robbers and finally two of them broke into Ellen's home.

It was then that the beautiful girl displayed the first indication of the steel she possessed. Hearing the holdup men entering, she quietly got a gun from a desk in her room, opened the door and fired at them, again and again. They ran from the house and she went calmly on with her routine, as though nothing unusual had occurred.

Soon after the war she inherited a comfortable fortune from an aunt and, following a trip to England, spent considerable time traveling about Europe where, as usual, her beauty caused a furor.

Returning to the United States, she and her husband built a hotel in Brooklyn, which was barely completed when Captain Jack died of heart failure. A few weeks after his death the hotel burned to the ground. Ellen felt that this marked the end of a period in her life.

Grief-stricken, she tried to plan the future. She had loved Jack with a deep, strong devotion and knew that such a love could not come again. So now she would make a life without love. She would go West and take part in the building of the "New Empire."

Having come to a decision, she

acted at once, packed and got ready to go. While she was waiting for the stage which would start her on her way to Gunnison, Colorado, a stranger, struck by her beauty, attempted a flirtation. Without a word, Ellen pulled a gun and shot at him. As he dashed away she watched him with casual disinterest, her thoughts once more busy with the future. She would wrest a vast fortune from the West, she told herself—one of the greatest fortunes in the world. After that——

Bleakly, she realized there wouldn't be much after that, because the man she loved was gone.

IN GUNNISON she started operations at once. After having a large log cabin built, she opened a restaurant which she called "Jack's Cabin." It was a success from the first day, and was constantly crowded with customers who came to stare at Ellen's beauty. She talked so much of Captain Jack that gradually the name became attached to her and she was called "Captain Jack."

A growing stream of prospectors found their way to the restaurant run by "the girl with the beautiful hair." They told her of their hopes and failures, their strikes, and showed her their ore samples.

And then Gunnison churned into sudden excitement. A man named "Black Bill" Smith had arrived. Smith was one of the most notorious gunmen and killers of the West—the type who roamed the country, killing for the joy of destruction. Now, following his usual tactics, he was blasting lead at any one in his way—and finally made the mistake of attacking a crowd of Ute Indians.

The Indians, tomahawks ready, started to capture him and would not stop no matter how many of their number fell dead before Smith's guns.

Realizing his danger, Smith took shelter in the cellar of Ellen's restaurant and prepared to fight it out. The Utes followed, sweeping toward the restaurant in a mob.

As they hurled themselves at her door, Ellen caught up her guns and stepped outside. The Indians ignored the threat and kept on coming. With seeming calm, she thumbed the hammer and shot into the crowd, wounding two.

The red men halted indecisively and Ellen whirled back into her restaurant. Running down the steps to the cellar, she stalked up to the man known throughout the West as a killer.

"Now," she said, "hand over those irons."

Smith looked into her chill blue eyes and handed them over. She called the sheriff to take him prisoner and then resumed the business of the day.

A great silver strike was made in the hills near Gunnison. Ellen promptly bought half interest in one of the most promising mines, the Black Queen.

She was now well on her way to the wealth and power she coveted. And, strangely, she took on a sharper beauty as she saw her dreams being realized. Fiery, apparently made for romance, having buried love, she found stimulus in wresting a fortune from the world of men.

Then, as the Black Queen was proving that it was one of the best mines in the district, a stranger arrived in Gunnison. He was Larry Walsh, a tall, dashing, impressive man who immediately started in mad pursuit of Ellen.

In spite of her background and her experience with determined men, she found herself unable to resist

Walsh. He had a glamour as striking as her own. As handsome as she was beautiful, he also possessed the dazzling charm occasionally encountered in the Irish. Ellen once more fell hopelessly in love—or believed that she did—and they were married.

BUT within a few weeks, she awakened to the truth. Walsh was nothing more than a fascinating crook and was not at all in love with her. It was her money and the Black Queen that he coveted.

Facing this realization, Ellen acted with characteristic decision. She hired detectives to investigate him and his past. They discovered numerous startling things, one of which was that he had already been married when he married Ellen. Behind him was a long trail of petty crimes and not such petty dishonesties.

Coldly, she confronted him with these facts. For a long time the handsome Irishman stared at her. And during that time he was thinking with desperate speed. He could not give up hope of gaining control of the Black Queen now. He had gone too far for that.

There was only one way out of the situation. That was to kill Ellen. As soon as the thought was clearly formed he lunged at her, knocked her to the floor and then attempted to push her into an open fire.

But Ellen had learned early about the violence and passions of men. She fought for her life now and fought with a savagery equal to his. Even as the flame caught at her sparkling blond hair, she broke free and ran screaming from the house.

Walsh disappeared, keeping himself carefully hidden, waiting until Ellen should be convinced that he had left the country. When he believed that sufficient time had elapsed, he stole back to her house by night and planted dynamite under the walls, intending to blow up the building and his wife with it. Then he could make claim to her estate.

But Ellen realized too clearly just the quality of man with whom she was dealing and she was waiting for him. Hearing the noise outside, she took a gun and, barefooted, padded through the darkness to where Walsh was working. When she came up behind him he was on his hands and knees, planting the dynamite. She calmly leveled her gun, aimed and fired—sending two bullets into his body.

Wounded, but not fatally, he staggered to his feet and ran. This time he actually did leave the country—forever—wanting to put all possible distance between himself and the beautiful woman he had married.

Ellen started suit for divorce and immediately numerous people began to sue for collection of debts contracted by Walsh.

A BANK, attempting to realize on notes which Walsh had given them, decided to take several loads of the rich ore out of Ellen's mine by force.

The manager of the bank summoned fifty men. Then, armed with legal documents, sheriffs and various officials, he headed for the mine. Cautiously, he stopped a few yards away and ordered his gunmen to go in after the ore.

But before they could reach the entrance, Ellen appeared—standing tall and slim, her fair hair glittering in the sun. In each hand she held a gun. When the men surged forward she opened fire.

They halted and their own weap-

ons began to flame. But the fair, beautiful woman held her ground and within a few minutes shot down half a dozen of the invaders. Abruptly the men dropped their arms, picked up their wounded comrades and left.

Later, Ellen sued the bank and won. But she was now swamped with debts and finally sold her share in the Black Queen for $25,000.

This money she used to finance various prospecting trips and finally opened a mine in Ouray, offering it to a group of Eastern speculators for $60,000. But before the deal could go through, silver was demonitized and a large part of her fortune vanished.

However, she still had enough to live comfortably. Discouraged by her failure to wring vast wealth from the mountains, she turned to the remembered pleasures of her youth and began to travel. She spent a great deal of time in Utah and was intensely interested in the Mormons, although thoroughly disapproving of them.

Wherever she went men fell in love with her and pursued her with avowals. But Ellen was through with men and love. She always carried a gun, now, and there was a cynical little curve to her beautiful mouth.

Finally she returned to Colorado and settled in Denver. After buying a very attractive home, she pursued a quiet life, gathering a circle of friends around her.

But—never again was a man permitted to threaten her way of life. She was charming, pleasant and friendly until an admiring male launched into a declaration of his affections. Then she would whirl on him with her eyes cold and say, "Do you see what I have here?"

The would-be lover's glance would drop to her hand bag and she would open it to show the business end of a gun.

It was not long before men avoided any mention of the tender emotion and Ellen at last achieved peace.

She lived through gracious, contented years, remaining in Colorado until her death, which occurred when she was eighty-three.

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ACTS BETTER THAN EVER!
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(Advertisement)

by Sally Noon Burrell

PECOS BELLE

A topsy-turvy, exciting romance involving a pugnacious little girl—a school-teacher who can't spell—and a handsome young gambler——

GET the yellow skunk, Karoly! Shoot low! The cheating so and so! I saw him palm that ace," piped a childish voice, through the stillness of late afternoon.

The teacher hurried to the schoolhouse doorway and looked out at an amazing sight. A child of twelve, perhaps, was pickaback, and the man enduring it was anything but pleased. Not only that but she was choking him with her long black braids.

Weak from laughing, another man leaned against the schoolhouse, watching.

Both were strangers to Nance Bedell, the teacher, and were either father and daughter, or brother and sister; the latter, she guessed, as the laughing man seemed very young. She knew the victim.

"Stop that instantly! Let poor Mr. Simpson go. The very idea!" gasped Nance, advancing fearlessly.

"The idea yourself," cried the girl,

A Novel

"Some one didn't want me to kiss you. Well, it's a pleasure deferred—and besides—a kiss should never be hurried——"

taking another reef in her braids, bringing out a squawk from her victim. "This scum was cheating and I caught him at it."

"Fran, Fran, stow your bellicoseness," the young man drawled.

The girl turned an impish face, lighted by laughter, as she met her brother's eyes; but she released her victim, who ran down the street. "Tell her what the damn——" she began, to have a silencing hand laid over her lips in no gentle manner.

"You're talking to a lady, Fran," drawled her brother, his dancing eyes plainly admiring as he looked at the shocked teacher.

"What's a lady, Karoly, in our young lives?" piped the imp.

He swept off his broad-brimmed hat. "Are you the teacher? If you are, Heaven help you, for I've got to turn this hellcat over to you. It's a rotten trick to play on any lovely young lady, especially a dude, but who am I to defy the law?"

Nance looked him over, her cool gray eyes sparkling with anger. "You ought to be ashamed, letting a mere child swear and talk so."

"Well," he said with a graceful shrug, "fix her so she won't. Undo all I've done wrong. This is Frances Varney, teacher, aged twelve. You will have to figure out her grade for yourself."

"I'll examine her. I suspect she is appallingly ignorant," Nance said freezingly. "Are you her father?"

"After a fashion," he admitted. "Mother died when she was born; father was killed in a gun battle when she was three."

"Well, bring her to school to-morrow before nine, *unarmed*. She can't wear guns. The very idea!" Nance added explosively.

"Oh, I bet you I can! I can shoot them, too," interrupted Fran fierily, drawing the miniature six-guns from the holsters and doing it with lightning rapidity for one so young.

"She means, half-pint, that you aren't allowed to wear them, not that you don't know how," the young man corrected. "All right, teacher, I'll disarm the lady, wash behind her neck and ears—— Is there anything else?" The young man's hazel eyes were as green as jade.

"No." Nance turned a stiff back on him and marched back up the schoolhouse steps.

"Oh, yes, there is; I just remembered," came the voice behind her. "I almost forgot to tell you that you are the most beautiful redhead I ever saw. That will take time, I suspect. You have so many admirable features."

"You're insolent!"

"No, ma'am, not at all. You have lashes an inch long and curly, and a dimple deep as—— Say, I reckon a fellow'd like to put a kiss in that dimple beside your pretty red mouth."

Bang! went the schoolhouse door.

Inside it, Nance leaned against the door and found she was shaking with anger. Never, in her life, had she met up with such an audacious young man.

Slowly, she went to the window and looked out. He saw her, was expecting her, for he had waited. His laughter came, like quicksilver, and ran over his handsome, mocking face as he kissed his hand to her.

"I didn't tell you that there's a dimple, too, under your chin, just the right fit for——"

Nance slammed down the window on the rest of his sentence, slammed down all of them and retreated to her desk; but she could still see the street up which he must go, since it was the only street in the busy mining town.

They were going up the street now and the little girl swaggered just the way her brother did, swung her hat by the chin strap just as he did. They were ridiculously alike with their arrogant black heads and dancing green eyes. Where had they come from? Who were they? What an awful little girl!

NANCE closed her desk and got her hat. Now she had an excuse to look in the mirror. She knew she was pretty; every man at Gun River had told her so for the last five months. She had a tiny dent close to the corner of her mouth, which danced in and out in a distracting way, as if her mouth wasn't lovely enough without it to call attention. Her hair was liquid amber and highlighted with red. Her eyes were the gray of northern rain, with a touch of ice about them which made a man long to be the one to melt the ice to the warmth indicated by the red

in her hair. Karoly was right, too, if that was his name; there was a dimple at the base of her throat where a pulse beat like a captive white bird.

Nance's eyes flashed and yet did not warm. She crammed on the stylish gray straw, picked up gray gloves and purse and hurried out, almost forgetting, in her agitation, to lock her door.

Waiting for her, holding nettlesome bay ponies in check, was Will Masters, owner of the largest ranch in the State. Nance had about made up her mind she liked him well enough to marry him when he should ask. It was that or teach school for the rest of her life.

Nance Bedell's father had had unlimited money once, but had lost it and taken his life, leaving his only child penniless. She had answered an ad for a teacher for Gun River. Not that she was particularly fitted, but because it promised a living and the school board was nonexistent, so the job carried no examination if the teacher brought references.

She had had the usual, rather useless city education and that was all. She had carried off her lack by her beauty, and hoped she would be asked to teach another year. After all, she could teach the children to read and write and do simple sums. That was all miners' children needed, for they, like their fathers, would be taking the Gun River local to the mines each day, once they were past school age.

"You look all pinked up, Nance," Will Masters said admiringly, then added anxiously, "None of them little varmints been pestering you, have they?"

"No." Nance sprang to the seat of the buckboard as he held down his hand to her and the bays dashed off. It was her week to stay at the Masters' ranch.

She boarded around; each parent, in alphabetical order, kept the teacher a week. There were no children at the Masters ranch at the present, but there had been, so their name had not been taken from the list, for which Nance was glad.

Nance put her hand on Will's arm. "Who's that man and girl?" she added, indicating the willow-slim man in black leathers, the child, in miniature leathers like his, at his side.

"That's Karoly Varney, who built the Pecos Belle. He came to town a few days back."

"Oh!" Nance's tone was eloquent and her curly head lifted. A common gambler and he had dared talk to her about dimples, intimated he might kiss her sometime. Wouldn't she squelch him to-morrow?

They passed the Pecos Belle now. It did not look like a gambling house, for it was built like the beautiful, flat-roofed homes across the Rio Grande. The windows had little, iron-lace balconies and iron grilles over the openings and the walls glistened snowy white with many coats of gypsum over the adobe.

Nance had thought how shameful it was that the new building was not a home instead of a gambling hell. It was new, yet it did not look new, fitting in as it did among the feathery peppers and mimosas. Not a tree had been chopped down. The wings rambled in and out of the trees and one great pepper tree dominated an inner court, as Nance knew. Will had showed her through the place when it was being built.

"That child ought to be taken away from him," Nance said explosively.

"Reckon so; but it might not be healthy to try it. These green-eyed guys ain't so easy-going as they look.

I've seen a couple in my time and, get them stirred up, their plumb poisonous," Will said mildly.

No more was said as the ponies tore down the trail toward the ranch nestled at the foot of Gun Range. Nance wished the middle-aged man beside her had more audacity and fire, though it was his very calmness which had attracted her toward him, and made her decide his ranch would be a calm haven even for a city girl. She was sick of cities.

AT THE END of a five-mile drive, the ponies dashed down a lane, fringed with quaking aspens, to a pleasant ranch house built of the stone from the mountains, whose shadows lay long over the entire ranch at this hour of the day.

When Nance came out of her room and joined the family below stairs she found that a stranger was at the table, between "Mom" Masters and Kate, the tall, handsome sister of Will.

It was Cody Masters, Will and Kate's brother, home from his wanderings. His bold, black eyes told Nance what Will's mild, brown ones feared to say—that she was a beauty.

"Reckon I'll have to hang around a while," he said impudently. "First time we ever raised much at Gun Ranch except stone."

"Cody," Mom said mildly, beaming at her dashing youngest.

"It's so, isn't it, Katy? By the way, what you all het up over?"

"There's a big dance and housewarming at the Pecos Belle," Kate said, her black eyes blazing with excitement. "We're all invited and going."

"You mean nice people like you folks will go to the Pecos Belle?" gasped Nance.

"Lands, no, not after to-night! We got to go to the dance," explained Mom. "It's a courtesy we extend to new builders, and partly curiosity, too," she admitted. "The Pecos Belle opens to-morrow night and then womenfolks won't go there again."

"Kate's already got her eye on Varney. Means to reform him," Will said slyly.

Kate's handsome face flushed, and her eyes sparkled with indignation.

"Will Masters, you've always had a decent chance or who knows you might have had to gamble to support yourself and family."

"Will ain't got the hands for it," sneered Cody, looking at his brother's huge, work-hardened hands. "What'll teacher do when it is her turn to stay at Varney's?"

"Stay at Varney's?" gasped Nance. "You mean——"

"Cody's just teasing you," Mom said hastily. "What are you girls going to wear to the dance? I hear there's a real city orchestra come down from Denver to play, and city food, too."

"I don't think I'll go," Nance said faintly.

"Oh, but you'll have to, Nance," Kate cried, in horror. "The teacher couldn't stay away. It'd be an insult. Gun River's awfully touchy about its manners, even if it will snub the Varneys to-morrow."

"Here I've been plumb figuring on dancing with a real city girl that knows how to shake a foot same's I do, city fashion," Cody said winningly. "I'll keep the bold, bad gambler away."

"No shenanigans, Cody," ordered Mom. "I declare though, I'm right glad you're here, now that that Ace gang has taken up its home back in the range. Every one is sure they got their eye on the ore trains pulling out of here every month."

The girls went away to dress, after

the dishes were done and the huge kitchen in order, the table set for breakfast.

Nance, in shimmering black lace, a gold ribbon at her belt, another fastening her curls, gold slippers on her slim feet, was dressed first. Kate tried first a yellow, then a blue, and finally decided on a pink dress, managing to look like a sweetheart rose, Nance decided enviously, wishing she had black hair, instead of curls the color of amber honey.

Mom went with the young folks as a matter of course, riding in front with Will, while Cody and the two girls squeezed into the back seat of the double buckboard.

THEY WHIRLED up the long wing of the Pecos Belle. Windows were open to the soft spring air and music poured out. The girls talked excitedly as they left their wraps in a room down the hall and joined the men.

Quite naturally, Cody swung Nance out on the floor, Will following with his sister, while Mom and a miner, in his Sunday best, joined the dancing throng.

Nance's glance picked out Karoly at once, dancing with his young sister, and noted that they danced perfectly together, though the child's head came just to his heart.

Cody scowled as his eyes fell on their host. "Well, I'll be jiggered! I've seen that duffer before. He used to run a big gambling place on the border, until he got run out."

"Sh-h! You're his guest now," warned Nance nervously, wondering why Cody did not look straight at her while he talked of his host. If he'd been one of her pupils she'd have been sure he was lying. But she was willing to believe anything of the audacious young scamp, Karoly, who had talked so boldly to her a few hours before.

"Your word's law, lovely," Cody said meekly, clasping her tighter.

Nance was glad when the music stopped. She saw young Fran disappear through a rear archway. Then Karoly was standing before her, smiling sleepily.

"Is this my dance?" he asked, soft mockery shimmering in his eyes.

"No. It belongs to Mr. Will Masters," Nance said coldly.

"My error! I thought the host had second choice." He bowed again, left her and went to Mom and Kate. An instant later he was dancing with Kate.

Will was nowhere in sight and Nance stayed close to Mom until the dance was half over, shaking her head at clamoring partners. Will showed up at last, looked delighted to find she wasn't dancing, and carried her away onto the floor.

Will was a kindly gentleman but a horrible dancer.

Karoly knew by now that Nance had lied to him about having the second dance. It seemed that Gun River ethics gave the host the second dance with any girl in the place and she had violated those ethics. She'd have to apologize, she supposed, when he asked her again.

Kate was back, flushed and smiling. "It's like dancing with liquid lightning to dance with Karoly Varney," she whispered. "I thought sure he'd dance with you first. You're so beautiful."

Nance shook her head. She wouldn't spoil Kate's pleasure by telling her he had asked her first, or reveal her own rudeness in refusing him.

Partners came thick and fast now for both girls, keeping Nance especially busy. But Karoly did not ask her again. At the dance before sup-

per, they were on the same set and the caller howled, "Dance your lady the length of the hall." It was Karoly who fell to Nance's lot for the breathless swing down the long room.

His sparkling green eyes were half hidden by his long, silky lashes as he drawled, "Too bad! The caller didn't know, I reckon, how badly you didn't want to dance with me." He drew her closer, until their bodies seemed to flow together liquidly and she could feel the ripple of silken muscles in Karoly's long, slim body. Kate was right, he was a superb dancer, but his words had driven away all thoughts of an apology.

He turned her deftly for the swing back to their set and his smooth, warm cheek was pressed against hers for a moment. Then they were back in the circle. She hadn't found a word to say.

There was supper, bountiful and varied, which she shared sitting between Will and Cody. Kate sat with their host at the far end of the long table.

Then the evening was over, for dawn was pinking the east.

Nance ran up the long hall, the last one to get her wraps.

The kerosene lamp had gone out in the long hall to the room where her cape was hung, and, running swiftly, she collided with some one who either did not see her or else made no effort to get out of her way. She felt herself seized and held up off the floor between hands like steel. A possessive mouth touched her petal-soft lips, then clung as though the sample had made him hungry for more.

For a moment Nance's world spun, as her lips parted under the demand of the unknown's. Before she had recovered from her surprise and could protest, she forgot that she had wanted to. Such an ecstasy had seized her as she had never known; excitement mingled with joy and fear, then surrender to the inevitable and dangerous.

She was set on her feet. Then there was a soft breathless laugh of excitement, the slam of a door and Nance was alone.

She stumbled to the door of the coat room, fumbled for her cape, found it because it was the only wrap left on the rack, and put it around her. Her hands shook as she turned the high collar up around her head so it hid her bruised, red mouth. She went down the hall again and out into the glory of the sunrise, pausing a moment in the white archway to look for her party.

Cody came forward, breathing rather fast. Conviction seized her that he had been the one who had caught her in the hall and kissed her as she had not known one could be kissed. Then she saw Karoly Varney standing beside the buckboard. His smile was mocking and triumphant.

Nance hoped he would lift her to the high seat; then she would know whether it had been his hands which had held her in a vise while he kissed her into ecstasy and surrender. But he stepped aside and Will Masters lifted her into the seat.

Cody took his seat beside her and they whirled into the trail, the dawn painting a pathway of rose, out of the dust.

"Nance showed more sense than you did, Kate. She didn't dance once with Varney," Cody said, in triumph. "She was the only girl who didn't fall down and kowtow to his Satanic majesty."

"I can't see why you call him that," protested Kate. "He is a perfect gentleman and has to make his living somehow. Seems to me our for-

tune was founded through granddad's expert use of the long rope."

"Every one rustled in those days," Cody said carelessly, and the subject was dropped.

Nance would not admit she was disappointed because Karoly had taken her snub so literally. If it hadn't been for the last few minutes, though, the dance would have been boring. Strangely enough the kiss had redeemed it. It was that kind. Even if she never found out who had given it to her, it would still glow against her heart like a precious jewel. But she'd find out some way. There'd been no trace of insult in it, just a joyous meeting of lips that seemed to belong together.

GOOD THING to-day was Friday, with school out at three instead of four, for she had to change from lace dress to divided skirt and shirt and riding boots, get her breakfast and start back over the trail to town.

She had tied a glowing orange scarf about her neck, hiding her throat and vagrant dimple (though she wouldn't admit it) from audacious green eyes. She rode Flipper, the mate to Kate's gray, to town and school this day.

Neither Karoly nor his sister showed up, and the short day turned long. It meant she would have to visit the living quarters of the Pecos Belle to learn why Fran had not appeared, for she served not only as teacher but truant officer in the little town.

After the day had dragged till two, it raced to three. Pieces had been spoken, songs sung with haste, it seemed, and Nance was free to saddle Flipper and ride toward the Pecos Belle.

It droused in the warm sunlight, white walls, flat roofs and grilled windows giving no outward sign of its purpose. She left her horse at the rear at the hitching rail and lifted the heavy knocker on the door which seemed to lead to the living quarters.

KAROLY himself opened the door, curly black hair rumpled, eyes more gold than green for an instant, before they were veiled. "Oh, it's teacher. Do come in, miss," he drawled.

"I came to see why your sister didn't come to school to-day," Nance said stiffly, making no move to enter.

"My reasons are quite lengthy and you might prefer to hear them without danger of others hearing, too," Karoly drawled. "They have mainly to do with your qualifications."

Nance entered hurriedly and sat down in the nearest chair, sure her ears had deceived her. "You said my—my qualifications?" she stuttered angrily.

"Why, yes. I am quite particular what Fran learns," the gambler said, dropping into a near-by chair and locking long, slender hands about his knee.

"Especially profanity," Nance said tartly, but her cheeks reddened and her eyes grew frightened. It mattered so much now that the town renew her contract for the coming fall. She couldn't leave until she knew the truth of last night's adventure.

"Good wholesome profanity isn't the worst thing in life," drawled her tormenter. "There's also a matter of the teacher's personal character." he paused.

"No one can say a thing against my character," said Nance, springing to her feet.

He looked up at her. "Do sit down until I've finished, because good manners insist I stand up if you do."

"I'll go; then you can lie down for all I care," said Nance.

His hand flashed out, caught her and put her back into her chair.

"Usually I am obeyed," he said, his voice like a knife under silk. "Last night, my dear teacher, you refused to dance with me, though common courtesy demanded that that one night in a gambler's life he could choose his partner, one of his guests."

"So you take out your petty spite on me by questioning my ability and character?" demanded Nance, flushing crimson.

An answering flush crept up Karoly's lean cheek. "You might be right in calling it spite, if it weren't for something I saw in the dark hall off the dance hall," he said steadily. "It happened I had been in the darkness long enough, trying to make the lamp burn, so I could see like a cat. I saw you running down the hall, a light-footed Atlanta——"

"Oh," whispered Nance, white-lipped.

"Yes, I saw you being kissed and not protesting at all, though the man was a stranger to you," purred Karoly, his eyes pure green. "Now what, Miss Teacher, have you to say to that? Gun River is quite touchy about its teacher's morals, I understand. After to-night I shall, as owner of a gambling hall, become *declasse*. Why should I be lonely, knowing what I do about you?"

"Oh, you're lower than I thought! You'd take advantage of what you saw?" gasped Nance, paling.

Karoly rose to his feet. "No, you poor little fool. Run along. You can't undo what Fran already knows, thank the gods of the lost tribes!"

Nance got to her feet, white-lipped. "I insist you tell me what you plan to do with your information. I suppose you won't believe I couldn't help myself? That whoever it was took me by surprise? That if you tell it around I'll lose my school?"

Karoly nodded. "It shall be our secret," he promised, twin devils dancing in his eyes, or so it seemed to the overwrought girl.

Nance looked at him in horror. "You mean you will take advantage of what you——"

"Would I not?" he said, his laughter mocking. "But in this case, no! You do not attract me, you see." He opened the heavy door and bowed. "Fran will be at school to-morrow. I trust this will be a lesson to you."

Nance fled past him, shaking with hatred.

Behind her the gambler carefully closed the door, then looked at his long, clever gambler's hands. They were shaking and his eyes looked sick. "But you made her despise you and that's what you set out to do," he said harshly, his lips thin with pain.

II.

NANCE RODE blindly toward the mountains. It was the next day, in the afternoon, yet she had not forgotten yesterday's experience, when a gambler had taken her to task for allowing a stranger to kiss her. Allowing? Maybe it had looked like it and, after her first surprise and resentment, she hadn't tried to escape. Karoly had not thought her fit to teach his sister.

Her cheeks burned with shame at the thought. It had been constantly with her through a long night. Nance kicked the gray into a lope, left the Masters' spread behind and began the climb.

By and by her troubled mind calmed.

She was halfway to the summit of the first mountain when a piñon

squirrel leaped from an overhanging rock onto the nose of her horse. He reared, squealing with fright, nearly unseating his rider, then broke into a mad run, leaping at right angles to the trail, clearing bushes and rocks.

Nance desperately pulled leather, as her mount sailed over a mass of mesquite, landing with a jolt in a tiny clearing, where he proceeded to buck his rider clear over another bank of the same shrub. Nance landed, stunned, in a tiny, hidden canyon. She sat up, her head spinning, and looked around. Far down and rapidly retreating, she heard the hoofbeats of her pony, evidently homeward bound. Here it was silent except for the chatter of piñon squirrels and the musical sound of falling water.

Limping, Nance went around a rock fall and came out on the edge of a pool, made by water gushing out of the rock high over her head and falling in a silver veil. Through the water Nance could see greenery and rocks. Pictures reflected in the clear water, she decided. Then she turned and found that the rocks back of her alone should be reflected. So there was something *beyond* the veil of water.

Her bruises forgotten, Nance stepped through the thin veil and found herself in another canyon, opening beyond the waterfall. Pushing aside the bushes Nance looked around. There was a hole in the rocks and before it lay a skeleton bleaching in the sun.

It was a man's skeleton and Nance whitened. A warning whir from the rocks made her leap backward through the falls. She fell full length into the pool. When she gained the grass she was wet from head to heels and had lost her hat in that hidden place, guarded by dead men and rattlesnakes.

Shuddering, Nance dashed through the mesquite screen, careless of lurking mother sidewinders, across the gully and through the second screen. She came out, dripping and panting, on a faint path made by animals on their way to water.

The trail led down and she went in fear and trembling, expecting every minute to meet a mountain lion or some other wild animal. She came at last to a real trail made recently. She limped down this, knowing it must lead somewhere eventually.

It led around a huge rock and voices stopped her in her tracks. She waited, glad there were human beings near, but afraid to show herself until she was sure they were people who could help her.

"Time Ace and the Kid were showing up," growled a voice. "If we make our plans to hold up the express, we only got a few hours."

"Ace is a fool to take that Kid along everywhere he goes. She's likely to shoot off her mouth sometime."

"Ace'll keep her mouth shut."

Nance fearfully worked her way back along the trail in the opposite direction, careful that not so much as a single pebble rolled under her boot heels. Renegades, the "Ace of Spades'" gang, about whom all Gun River range was stirred up——

Then she heard horses' hoofs coming rapidly. Before she could find a hiding place on this barren spot in the trail, they swept around a rock. The man in the lead was Karoly Varney. Following him was Fran.

Nance gasped, her thoughts racing. Ace and the "Kid." Here they were on their way to a rendezvous with the renegades. He *would* hold up her

misadventure in the dark hall as a threat over her head, would he?

KAROLY reined in his powerful black stallion and looked at Nance, his face a mask as he took in the drenched figure, shirt torn by thorns, curls in wild disorder.

"Fancy meeting you here," he drawled. "Is it city style to go walking in the mountains? Or was it swimming in the mountains?"

"My horse bucked me off," Nance said coldly. "I was just on my way down."

"We were back-tracking your horse then. He went by too quickly for us to catch him." Karoly's voice was equally cold now. "I thought it was Kate who had been thrown, but might have known no horse would throw a magnificent horsewoman like her. It would be a dude school-teacher." He leaned down. "Good thing Widow Maker has carried double before."

"You don't mean——" began Nance, flushing.

"I mean we're packing you home before you get into mischief." Karoly caught her around the waist and lifted Nance in front of him. "Back-track, corporal," he ordered, and Fran whirled her horse and led the way up the trail.

"But your gang is waiting for you, Ace," Nance said recklessly. "I listened to them from behind a rock. They were getting terribly impatient for Ace and the Kid to show up."

"Is that so?" Karoly's voice sounded startled.

"Yes, it is! And you dared scold me because some man grabbed me and kissed me," spluttered Nance, "when you are only using the Pecos Belle for a blind for your operations as leader of that gang of renegades. I happened to hear, too, that you plan to hold up the gold train."

"Oh, is that so?" he repeated, losing his studied calm. "Just where is this rendezvous you stumbled upon?"

Nance shook her head. "No, you don't. You know it as well as I do."

"I see. I wanted to find out if you could back-track, but you can't, so we're safe." He reined in the black and looked back up the trail carefully, nodded and put him in motion again. "Takes a dude to get bucked off and gum things."

"Don't let me keep you," said Nance. "Put me down and I'll walk. I'd rather."

"No doubt, but you're eight miles from the Masters' gate, so I'll play the gallant and see you home." His arm tightened until Nance gasped under the steely pressure.

Determinedly, she changed the subject. "What did you call your horse?"

"Widow Maker," he said, his voice crisp.

"Why such a crazy name?"

"It isn't crazy. That's what he is. He was an outlaw until I gentled him. He's still an outlaw if any one else tries to ride him. How many of my gang were waiting for me?" he asked abruptly.

Nance thought hard, curly head bent. Should she tell him she hadn't looked at them? No. As long as she knew his secret, hers was safe.

"Half a dozen," she said carelessly. "I don't see how even you would take a child among them. If it's the last thing I do, I'll see that she is taken away from you."

"You will? How nice. And the little matter of your letting strangers kiss you in dark halls?" Karoly purred.

"Oh! As if my knowing you are the infamous Ace of Spades isn't enough to keep you still," gasped Nance.

"You'd have to prove it, you know, teacher. By the way you *do* have a name, don't you?" he asked provokingly.

"Certainly. It is Miss Bedell."

"My mother's name was Dell, Mary Dell," Karoly said oddly. "Well, Miss Bee-Dell, let me whisper a sweet nothing into that shell-like ear. It'll be unhealthy, oh, very, for you to so much as think of Ace and the Kid again, let alone tell any one about them."

"Are you daring to threaten me?" gasped Nance.

"Just telling you, teacher." Karoly grinned. "You might find yourself carried away by my men if they heard you prattled, and Gun River, good as it is, has ears that listen for tattling and get it back to the right place."

"And you wouldn't stop them?" asked Nance appalled.

"Why should I? We aren't friends, never could be friends. I only look out for my friends. Now if you were Kate——" He paused tormentingly.

"Keep Kate's name out of your mouth," raged Nance. "You keep away from her, too, or I'll have to tell her——"

Karoly buried his fingers in her damp curls and jerked her head back against his shoulders, so he could look down into her face.

"Whisper, even whisper one word of your knowledge and your life won't be worth a plugged peso. Swear to keep still!"

Tears sprang to Nance's eyes from the pain of her pulled hair, but she asked spunkily, "And if I don't?"

"Don't make me tell you. I think you know," he said, his voice rough. "Swear to keep still? Swear by your father's memory."

"Yes," whispered Nance, scared. "Yes, I swear to keep still." She was freed and sat up, drawing a long, shaken breath. "If you knew how low and awful I think you are, you train robber!"

"I can imagine. You don't pull your punches any," Karoly said dryly. "Well, I hope the gang doesn't get tired of waiting for me to take you home. They might disband for the day and spoil our hold-up of the train."

Nance was stunned to silence by his audacity. She knew she shouldn't have sworn to keep still, but she was afraid to do anything else. Never, in her arrogant young life, had any man so frightened her. Never had she found one of his age that she couldn't bend to her own sweet will.

WIDOW MAKER danced along the trail, shying at blowing things. They reached the last slope into the valley in silence. Fran was riding ahead, out of hearing, and Nance marveled at her lack of curiosity.

Now she reined in and rode back. Karoly pulled Widow Maker to a walk.

"Some one is coming. I thought there were two at first," she said briefly.

"O. K., kid," Karoly said, giving her shoulder a pat. "Good work."

At that moment a rider galloped around a turn in the trail and came toward them. It was Cody, riding hard. Nance almost sobbed with relief.

He reined in beside the blacks. "Nance! Then you're all right? Good thing you happened along, Varney. Want to ride on back with me, Nance?"

"Yes, oh, yes," Nance said raggedly. "I've—I've held up Mr. Varney and his sister long enough."

Cody rode closer and lifted Nance from Karoly's unresisting arms.

"Thanks, Varney." He touched his bay with his heel. It dashed off down the trail before Nance could thank her other rescuers, if she had meant to.

Even with Cody's arm around her, she could still feel Karoly's steellike grip of her waist.

"I never was so glad to see any one in my life as I was to see you," Nance declared rashly. "That awful gambler!"

"Thanks for not liking him. I thought you acted awfully pleased to see me." Cody kissed the little curls bobbing on the nape of Nance's neck. "I don't need to tell you I'm mad about you, do I, lovely?"

"Are you?" Nance turned, her heart beating unsteadily, and looked at him. He bent over her eagerly.

If he kissed her she'd know whether it had been he or not. Now that she knew for sure that the wicked, thin line that was the gambler's mouth had not sullied hers, it had to be Cody. There hadn't been too many strangers at the dance, and only two who would have dared go so far.

Cody's eager lips were almost on Nance's when a shot blasted his expensive white sombrero from his head.

Nance made a grab for it and caught it as it sailed past.

Cursing wildly, Cody jerked out his guns and blazed away. Rocks lined each side of the trail, so that an army could have hidden along there. But he picked the exact spot and fired deliberately, getting a sighing moan as a result.

"Got him," he said, satisfied, and spurred the bay into headlong flight. "I'll drop you at the gate and go back and bury the body, if the buzzards don't get there first."

Nance shuddered. "Who could it have been?" she asked.

"Some one who didn't want me to kiss you," Cody said flatly. "Well, it is a pleasure deferred. Besides, I want to take my time. A kiss should never be hurried."

Then it *was* Cody who had kissed her, for there'd been no hurry about that long, leisurely kiss in the dark hall.

"Oughtn't we to go back and see?" stammered Nance, dizzy with the thought that it had been some one she could learn to love.

"No, the mountains are bristling with armed gunmen. The gold from up in the Gun Range mines is their objective. You mustn't ride alone into the mountains ever again," commanded Cody.

"Oh, I won't. I promise you," Nance said eagerly. "What do you know about this gang?"

"Only hearsay. It is headed by a guy called the Ace of Spades. His sidekick is a girl, called the Kid," Cody said easily.

"Did you ever see this Ace?" Nance asked breathlessly.

"No. But I understand he is a handsome chap, a real heartbreaker and very romantic." Cody laughed. "Here you are, sweet. I'll go back and see what damage I've done." He set Nance down beside the gate into the lane and was away again.

NANCE looked after him. Already he was far up the trail, the sun flashing on the red sides of the bay. Suddenly a thought came to her that turned her white and sick. Suppose it had been Karoly who had been shot. It would be like Karoly's devilish sense of humor to shoot Cody's hat off.

Her fingers closed on the top bar of the gate and the pleasant scene dipped and whirled, while sweat burst out on her forehead and wet her hair. "Oh, Lord, no," she whis-

pered, then gasped at what her prayer revealed. She cared about Karoly's well-being. He'd mocked her, insulted her, done everything to make her hate him, and yet, when the thought of harm to him came, it hurt her like a knife turning in her breast.

"Nance, where's Flipper? Why are you afoot?" Kate came running down the lane.

"Didn't she come home? But Cody came hunting for me," Nance said, in surprise.

"Oh, then he hobbled her somewhere along the way," Kate said relievedly. "You weren't hurt? What happened? You look all in."

"I am. Flipper threw me up in the mountains. A squirrel jumped on his head. The gambler and his sister came along and brought me to within a short distance. Then Cody came along and brought me the rest of the way. As we rode along, some one shot Cody's hat off. He shot back and hit whoever it was. He's gone to see," Nance explained tiredly, wetting her lips.

"The gambler? You mean Karoly Varney?" Kate asked smilingly. "Thank Heaven you don't like him. I wouldn't have a chance if you did."

"Kate! A Masters wouldn't marry a gambler," Nance said, in a strained voice.

"But Karoly said last night that he was getting sick of his way of living, that when he saw what a home his plans had made of the Pecos Belle, he was tempted to turn it into a real home, only he hadn't the money," Kate explained eagerly. "You know father left me a lot of mining stock in the El d'Or. It would keep my husband and me all the rest of our lives, if we lived at the Pecos Belle."

Nance nodded, her face pale. Kate would go, with full hands, to her husband. Already caring for Karoly, she didn't mind that he was a gambler. Nance hadn't a cent besides her small salary.

"Fran, his little sister, needs some one like you," Nance said generously. "Sooner or later some one will take her away from her brother if he doesn't marry and quit gambling."

"I know. That's what he's afraid of," Kate murmured thoughtfully.

Sudden, hot jealousy surged through Nance, that Kate should know all of Karoly's hopes and plans and fears. Then reason returned. She was silly. It was Cody she must think about, Cody who stirred her, whose kiss had made her heart beat hard in her ears.

Kate looked sideways at Nance, noting her silence and evident exhaustion. "Cody should have brought you to the house," she cried indignantly.

"He did just right," Nance defended him warmly. "The man he shot might have been dying. I know that he wouldn't see even a renegade suffer from lack of care."

Kate hesitated, then spoke impulsively, "Nance, don't get to liking Cody too much. He's my brother, but you're such an innocent little dude and not used to Cody's kind. He's wild and always in scrapes. I've heard dad, before he died, wish that Cody might die before he brought disgrace upon Mom and me."

"How awful," said Nance, trying to picture gay, handsome Cody dead, and shuddering away from the thought of any one dying.

Kate sighed, having gone as far as loyalty to her own brother permitted.

III.

CODY did not return and the ranch house grew quiet, as early bed-

time descended for the revelers who had danced until dawn the day before.

Nance couldn't sleep, but sat late at her window, watching down the trail for Cody. Suppose he ran into the Ace gang and was killed. Suppose it had been the young gambler who had been killed.

She fell asleep at last, at her post. She wakened in gray dawn, chilled to the bone and stiff, to crawl into her bed, her questions unanswered. She slept from sheer exhaustion, until Kate called her for breakfast.

Cody did not appear for breakfast, but no one mentioned the fact. He was still missing when the Masters and their guest left for church in Gun River. It was the one Sunday in the month when the circuit rider came.

Nance peeped slyly at the Pecos Belle as they passed it on their way to the schoolhouse. It basked like a sleepy white cat in the sunshine, and the grilled windows failed to answer her questions.

Unable to think of Fran alone, while Karoly might lie dead at Cody's hand, Nance slipped away in the rush of neighbor greeting neighbor, and went to the Pecos Belle to lift the great knocker of the big rear door.

An Indian answered the knocking.

Nance could scarcely make her voice get out the question, "The little girl?"

"Humph! Her go to church, hear about White Father," he grunted.

"Thank you." Nance fairly ran from the piercing black eyes of the Indian, expecting every minute to hear Karoly's mocking laughter.

She entered the schoolhouse, dismayed at the length of time it had taken her, and slipped into a seat in the rear, while all were on their feet for the first song. The wind was sweet with the spicy fragrance of pepper trees as it swept through the schoolhouse, and it seemed to go through Nance's heart, too, easing it. Fran wouldn't be at church if her brother were dead, the Indian's words had told her. Life seemed very pleasant now, to the girl in white organdy, a wide white hat drooping over her lovely face, little bright curls dancing on her white neck.

Her neighbor offered her half of a hymn book and she took it, then nearly dropped it as her gray glance raced from the slender, graceful hand up to the young gambler's face above it.

He knew she had had no idea of the identity of her seat mate. He could tell it from her face, which paled and flushed, though afterward people were to remind each other how she had come to sit beside him that morning.

But this morning, as Karoly's voice rose clear and strong, and people turned to look at the teacher and the gambler singing from the same book, only one thought was in each mind: "Miss Nance was a nice little thing not to shy away from the man she had had to sit beside, due to the crowd. Full of the milk of human kindness, she was, just as teachers should be."

They sat down and the circuit rider's sermon began.

Karoly had taken a small pad out of his pocket and was writing something. Nance felt him push the paper into her lap. Unwillingly she looked down at it.

"Why," he had written, "did you look as though I'd been raised from the dead?"

Nance bit her red lip, of a mind to ignore his impudence, then relented. The dimple nearest the gambler winked in and out as she

"Damn!" This being a dude school-teacher wasn't the fun some people seemed to think!

wrote wickedly, "I thought you were shot and killed by Cody, after you shot off his hat when he went to kiss me. I thought you were probbably buried by now."

Karoly grinned and canceled one of the bs in probbably and scrawled, "Aren't you the kissingest thing?" He pocketed the pad when he saw, by her color, that she had read it.

Another late-comer came in and crowded into the seat beside her, so Nance was forced to move closer to Karoly. She sat very still then, conscious of his shoulder pressing hers. He had to sit sideways to keep from crushing Fran against the wall, so he dropped his arm along the back of the seat and it lay there all during the service, burning through her thin gown, it seemed to Nance. She wondered why, since he hated her so bitterly, he turned toward her instead of his sister.

"That's a damn long time to sit still," Fran announced, in her clear treble, when the lengthy service was over, and people, who had thought kindly of the young gambler for bringing his sister to church, now frowned upon him.

Kate came hurrying up. "We'd like to get better acquainted with Frances. Couldn't she come to dinner with us? We brought ours to eat in the grove."

"Sorry, I have other plans for her. Another time if you will."

Nance, illogically felt pleased that he refused Kate a favor. It made his direct unkindness toward her less hurtful.

He stalked away through the crowd already moving toward the

grove between the schoolhouse and the cemetery, Fran taking catch steps to keep up with him.

Nance glanced after him nervously. She felt sure the Indian would tell him she had been to the Pecos Belle, on what, Karoly would be sure, was a flimsy excuse. She remembered the word she had misspelled and grew crimson. Spelling was not her strong point.

THERE WERE two wedding ceremonies to sit through and a funeral sermon, though the actual burial had been two weeks before; then they could go home. During the visiting after the last eulogy of the dead, Nance slipped away and strolled down a path to the rear gate of the cemetery and leaned there, looking toward the mountains. She felt lonely and unhappy for some reason.

Hard-ridden horses came down the trail. Karoly and Fran Varney raced by on their blacks and turned toward the mountains. What was their business at this late hour? Nance wished she could be riding with them or with Cody, into the purple haze creeping up the mountainside. She watched until she could no longer see the flaming scarlet of Fran's blouse, then turned and made her way back to the Masters' group.

As she reached there, the station agent came rushing up the street. "Holdup of the gold train from the El d'Or mines," he panted. "The engineer just walked in for help. We gotta ride, men! The varmints are headed by a slim feller in a black mask, with a white ace of spades cut into it, and a boy kid in a red silk shirt."

Nance felt the ground sway under her feet. Then Kate's hand gripped her arm hard. "Let's get Mom and travel. Will will borrow a horse from the livery stable and ride with the men." She fairly tumbled her protesting mother in the back seat of the surry to which Will had been hitching the bays when the news came. By the time Nance could get into the front with Kate, she was up and drawing the long whip out of the holder. She sent it hissing over the ponies and they broke into a mad run for home.

"What's the rush, Kate?" Nance asked, trying to make her voice sound natural.

"I want to get the news to Cody if he's home, so he can ride with them," Kate said loudly, then dropped her voice. "I saw Karoly and Fran ride past the back gate, headed away from the tracks. Fran had on a red shirt and the dumb men are just fools enough to lay the blame to them. As though Karoly would take Fran into danger. He worships her."

The ponies were fresh and ate up the miles. Now far up the trail both girls could see two horses coming fast. Kate grew ghastly. "They've swung around, to be seen coming *from* the mountains. But it won't work. Karoly came to town right after the Ace gang was rumored in the mountains. Gun River's narrow minds will make a mountain out of the coincidence. You get out at the gate and head them off. We've got to get a different-colored shirt on Fran and their horses rubbed down and cooled off, before any of the posse stop here on some excuse or other."

She looked back at her mother, tranquilly dozing through the wild ride, and said loudly, "I'll take Mom on to the house if you insist on walking. I never saw such a girl for exercise."

There was nothing for Nance to do but get down and obey. So, with

Mom awake and protesting against the teacher walking up the dusty lane in her white shoes, the buckboard rocketed down the lane toward the house.

Nance reluctantly planted herself in the middle of the trail and the two riders were forced to stop.

"You are to come up to the house for supper and Kate will not take no," she said firmly, though she flushed under the gambler's questioning look. "Fran, I have a pretty blue blouse which is just a shade too small for me, and new. I thought you could try it on while you were here. Don't you want to?"

Fran enthusiastically accepted, while her brother studied Nance's flushed face. Then he leaned down, caught her about the waist and lifted her up on Widow Maker.

"I think I know the plot," he said dryly. "You've heard of the train robbery and think we're fresh from the scene."

"Kate is the one who wants to save you from possible suspicion, or getting your neck stretched," Nance said, in a low, bitter tone. "She hasn't any idea I saw you riding from the direction of the railroad, headed for the mountains."

"And you, my wise little dude, are sure we are caught red-handed, headed off from our hide-out, by the posse who got between us and it," jeered Karoly.

Nance turned and looked at him, almost convinced she was wrong about his guilt. But the green devils in Karoly's eyes dared her to believe him innocent, and her face grew white and still.

"Of course I'm guilty, as guilty as hell," Karoly said roughly, reading question in her eyes.

FRAN was already nearly to the house. Nance saw Mom on her way to the bunk house on some errand Kate had thought up. Then Fran was ground-reining her black and dashing into the house.

Karoly dropped Nance onto the gallery and rode to the hitching rack.

"Send Kate out and you can look after Fran," he commanded, somewhat shortly.

Nance went quickly, his derisive laughter following her. Why did he have to be so hateful just because she had once refused to dance with him at his housewarming? It was all out of reason. Other men had been refused and had forgiven it.

Fran was eagerly explaining to Kate about the blouse when Nance came in.

"Mr. Varney wants to talk to you," the school-teacher said, somewhat shortly. "I'll take Fran up and she can try on the blouse."

Kate left them on winged feet, and Fran tucked her hand into Nance's, slim, alive fingers so like her brother's.

"I like you best. You talk short, like Karoly does when he feels way down deep about something. And I like you, too, because you're so damn beautiful," she confided.

"Then suppose we ground-rein the cusswords and leave them out cropping the grass, because I don't like them," Nance said quickly.

"Neither does Karoly. We had a housekeeper once and she swore just swell. Only Karoly was horrified when he came back after being away a year and heard her and me. He took me away, but the mischief was done." Fran laughed.

"Slide out of the blouse and let's see how you look in this," Nance said hurriedly, as she shook a soft, blue blouse free from its wrappings of tissue.

Fran swore fondly, then clapped her hand over her mouth, green eyes

shimmering over her mistake.

By taking a few stitches the blue shirt fitted. Fran tucked it into her black jodhpurs and strutted up and down, viewing herself in the glass. "You keep the red blouse," she suggested generously. "I like blue best. Some day I'm going to have a white dress like yours, too. Karoly said I could, when I asked him if you didn't look like an angel."

Nance bit back the question as to what he had said to that. She thought she knew. "I am going to take a nap. Suppose you go down and show your brother, then you can take this book and read till supper is ready."

"This blouse even smells like you," Fran said happily, sniffing, and she clattered away down the stairs to show her spoils.

Nance changed slowly from white dress and dusty slippers, to a filmy blue chiffon negligee, banded in white fur, relic of those happier days. Brushing her hair free from the confining ribbon she sank down in the easy-chair by the window. She'd excuse herself when Mom came to call her to supper. It would make Karoly hate her all the more, if that were possible, but she couldn't stay down there and watch his jeering green glance follow her about, then grow kindly when he looked at Kate.

She could hear Kate's happy laughter and Karoly's deep, low voice, all the mockery gone. Mom's delighted surprise, too, upon finding the Varneys there. Then the room faded and sleep claimed Nance.

She had had two bad nights and one night in which she had not slept because of the dance. Now overstrained nature was taking toll. When she wakened she was on her own bed, warmly covered against the chill of mountain summer nights, and, outside, dawn was poking out the stars one by one, to make way for the sun.

At breakfast Kate looked at Nance, her black eyes twinkling. "I came to call you for supper. You were fast asleep and on the point of falling out of your chair, so I called Karoly to carry you to your bed. I wish I could look as pretty as you do when you are asleep. You have the curliest lashes and in that chiffon-and-fur negligee—— Why, Nance, you aren't mad at me, are you?"

"No, of course not. I'm only sorry I can't share your enthusiasm for the gambler. His little sister is sweet, so old for her age. Are the boys back?" Nance asked quickly, deftly changing the subject.

"Yes. You should have seen Cody's face when he rode in and found the Varneys on the point of leaving. He kept looking at Fran so queerly, I wondered if the monkey might not notice and brag of her present. But she kept still. Seems Cody heard about the holdup of the train of ore and went there and picked up the posse's trail. They didn't find a trace of the gang either."

Nance was driven into town by Mom, glad for once to leave the hospitable ranch and go elsewhere.

IV.

EXCITEMENT still ran high when Mom and Nance stopped at the post office.

"Cody Masters came in last night with the posse and said he was sure it was the gambler from the Pecos Belle and his kid sister," gossiped the postmaster. "They never rode in till after midnight neither."

"Cody found out different. They was at my house and stayed for sup-

per and the whole evening," said Mom. "Kate asked them for supper, at church, so they came and had been looking over the ranch when we got home. Besides, the kid wore a red shirt and Fran wore as pretty a blue one as I've laid eyes on."

No one doubted Mom Masters a bit. Kate, with her quick wit had saved the day for Karoly Varney. Nance envied her, and no longer laughed at herself for any thoughts concerning the owner of the Pecos Belle.

Betting was even, as the days began to march past, which Masters boy would get the teacher, the steady, middle-aged, older one or the wild, younger one who seemed to have settled down now he had come home to stay.

"We follow the Ungers," Fran announced triumphantly, one night, as she lingered, watching Nance put on the Monday lesson for the pupils.

Nance bent her head and carefully made a letter. The circuit rider came again to-morrow so it would be church, and she wanted the lessons to be perfect, for next week was the time the town council would act on her application for the school the coming year.

How could she tell Fran that she wasn't coming to the Pecos Belle, even if the Vs did come next for boarding the teacher. She seldom saw Karoly Varney any more. It had been four weeks since she had seen him to speak to him. Fran had said he spent all his time in the mountains, but she never said what he was doing, though Nance was afraid she knew.

Though the Ace gang had not struck again at Gun River, it was making the entire State ring with its raids on mine-office safes, banks and express companies.

Of course, Nance could have gone to the Varneys. Kate had found an elderly and respectable widow to keep the living quarters at the Pecos Belle and look after Fran. Already there was a change, too, in the wilding, Fran, due in part to the careful training of Mrs. Montez, and partly to Nance's painstaking and loving care.

Nance knew now that Karoly had written Kate off his list as ruthlessly as he had eliminated Nance the very first day. Kate grew big-eyed and wan over it, then let a young mine superintendent pay her court, though Nance suspected it was to save her pride; perhaps to make Karoly jealous enough to come back, too.

"YOU KNOW WHAT? I blacked Billy Unger's eyes to-day," Fran said uneasily, breaking in on Nance's unhappy thought.

"Why?" Nance looked thoughtful, for she had been on the point of thinking about the bold chit with the bright, metallic hair who had been riding with Karoly last evening when she and Will Masters were on their way to a distant raising.

"Because he said that folks were saying that Karoly was a renegade and maybe was the Ace of Spades, and that I was the Kid, only I didn't ride with the gang any more because too many would know me and——"

"Your brother should be more careful about letting folks know he spends all his time in the mountains," Nance said coldly. "I'm glad he doesn't take you with him any more."

"I'm not. I love to ride fast and far with him. And Billy said the church people were going to take me away from Karoly and put me in an asylum for kids," Fran added scornfully. "As if Karoly would let them!"

"Why I hadn't heard any one men-

tion that," Nance exclaimed, startled.

"That's 'cause we are such friends. They're afraid you'd tell me and I'd tell Karoly and he'd take me away. But soon he will have all the money he wants and then we will go away. I said I wanted to take you with us and he laughed and said he was the dirt under your feet. What I'm afraid of is, he will marry that Lettice we found hurt in the mountains, and then cured. He's a sucker for hurt folks."

"You mustn't tell me such things, Fran," Nance said uncomfortably, wondering how many knives could be driven into one's heart before it became too numb to hurt. So the girl's name was Lettice. It fitted her.

"Oh, you don't tell all you know. That's why I tell you things. Well, I gotta drift. Maybe Karoly might get in early. Mrs. Montez and I have your room all ready. Karoly doesn't know you come to us next after the Ungers. It'll be a surprise." Fran grabbed up her books and started for the door, then came back and said shyly, "You spell forbidden with two ds, not one. I most forgot, and I saw you write it. *Karoly said he'd skin me alive if I let you make any mistakes on the board for Gun River to laugh about.*"

Nance looked after Fran, who was already running down the steps, then, cheeks red, erased the word and wrote it over, trying to think out Fran's amazing revelations. It would have been terrible if the whole countryside had assembled to-morrow and found a misspelled word in the teacher's writing on the board. Fran had saved her face more than once, but never before had told her why. When he hated her so, why had Karoly asked Fran to watch the teacher's board work and keep her from making mistakes? Probably to embarrass her because the sister of the man who hated her was the better speller.

Nance no longer denied her love for the young gambler. That was why she refused a direct answer to either of the Masters brothers. If she married one of them she could no longer, even in secret, love Karoly Varney. She was ashamed of her love, ashamed of loving a rascal, but love seemed to know no rules. It had grown in her heart like loco-weed on the plains. And he made no bones of being seen with the blond girl whom he had rescued.

"HELLO. Daydreaming?" Cody asked, behind her. "I came to take you to the Ungers. About ready to go?"

"Nearly," Nance said carelessly, but she wondered what brought Cody to town in the daytime when the spring round-up was under way. "What brings you to town?"

"A little business. Haven't you heard? John Thomas was killed. He's cashier at the El d'Or mine and he was shot defending the safe from the Ace's gang of roughnecks. Where've you been? The town's simply boiling over about it. He was pretty well liked." Cody sat down on Nance's desk and swung his spurred foot as he watched Nance straightening up the room and closing windows.

"I should say he was. I never hear anything, Cody. I don't know why," Nance said, coming back to her desk, determination in her gray eyes. "Tell me all the gossip, Cody. I've got to know."

"Folks shy away from telling you things because you and that Varney kid are such pals. It's common talk the gambler is the Ace of Spades. They are all set to send the kid to a

State institution and raze the Pecos Belle to the ground."

"Raze the Pecos Belle?" Nance asked, in horror. "And Karoly? What are their plans about him? They have no proof——" Nance's voice died away.

"Sometimes folks can get so wrought up they don't need proof. He's going to get a new necktie—one of rope. You see we might better have one dead gambler who was innocent, than a live one who looks damn guilty," Cody said virtuously.

"Where is Karoly now?" Nance asked faintly.

"We haven't caught him yet. Plans aren't all made. He's out of town, that wooden-faced Indian of his says glibly. Of course he is, engineering the mine-office robbery and Thomas' murder. His daily trips away are a dead give-away if the fool only knew it." Cody curled an arm about Nance's shoulders. "I must say for you, you never have any truck with Varney. Ain't a girl, even my sister, that wouldn't run to him if he crooked a finger that way. But he's dead gone on that new girl Lettice at the Pecos Belle," Cody added nastily.

Nance didn't answer. She couldn't. He was voicing all her thoughts of the past month but, said aloud, they sounded horrible.

"Let's cut out all this boarding-around business, lovely, and get married to-morrow, when the circuit rider comes. Another week and school's out for the summer. I've heard rumors it won't be offered you again." Cody drew her closer, his voice soft and wheedling.

"You have?" Nance asked faintly.

"Sure, you dear little bluffer. You can't get away with murder forever. You can't spell and they are saying Fran Varney does your problems for you," teased Cody.

"Why, that's a lie!" Nance was righteously indignant. "I'm not a good speller, but I'm studying hard over it, and I can do sums."

"What does it matter? Marry me and we'll be out of this town on the midnight train Sunday night and never come back. I'll buy you silk dresses and rings. I've got more money than we can spend in a long time."

Suddenly Cody jerked Nance against him and kissed her eagerly, expertly, on the mouth.

Nance fought to free herself, smothered by the possessive kisses, hating them, and hating herself for enduring the first one to settle a doubt forever in her mind.

Cody did not heed her struggles. His fingers bit into her shoulders until her blouse tore under them.

A name rose to her lips, a frantic cry of "Karoly!"

Cody's arms fell. His face grew black where it had been red and congested. "Karoly, eh? You, too, you lying little polecat! Well, we have been a mess of blind broom makers, seeing you and the kid so chummy and not guessing it was because you and her brother was thick. I suppose he was meeting you on his rides, and you bill and coo around in secret, then act before folks like you hate each other like poison."

Nance darted forward and slapped his face stingingly. "You low, insulting beast!"

He caught her, slapped her beside the head and sent her spinning into a chair, towering over her. "Know what? By to-morrow the Pecos Belle will be a heap of adobe, the fine furniture and rugs and curtains ashes! The kid will be on her way to an orphanage and Karoly Varney will be swinging from one of his pepper trees; while you, you two-timing little rat, will be ordered out

of town as unfit to be in charge of little children."

Nance stared up at him, her face dead white, except for the crimson mark of his hand on her cheek. No words would come to her lips to refute his charges. They were too awful to think about.

Cody laughed in her face. "And I gave up a swell kid because of those pretty dimples and cool gray eyes!" He slammed out, and Nance did not try to stop him.

V.

SHE DIDN'T SIT there long, for Fran Varney came racing up the steps. "Billy Unger's all broken out with something besides a black eye so we come next, 'cause they have to be quarantined. I'm taking you home with me now. I had Long Tom carry your things to the Pecos Belle. You are coming with me now, aren't you?"

Nance rose and put on her hat, her face set and white. She collected her possessions from the scarred desk, her books from the racks. She'd never be back here, something told her.

As they went into the street, she left the key in the schoolhouse door. Cody Masters was going from group to group in the street, talking to each one. As the child and teacher passed, no one spoke.

"The—rats," Fran said thoughtfully. "The town's dying on its feet because the mine is playing out, and Karoly doing his best to earn money so's he can turn the Pecos Belle into a home and never gamble any more."

They turned into the Pecos Belle. Fran proudly led the way across the patio to a big room with grilled windows, looking out into a wilderness of jasmine shrubs starred with bloom and sweet with honeysuckle. Rugs were deep-piled underfoot and a rich blue blanket covered the great four-poster in the corner on a dais.

"When I asked Karoly what room to give you, he laughed funny and short and said he reckoned this would do, because no one had ever had it. He said I mustn't feel badly if you didn't come though. Won't he be surprised?" said Fran.

"Well, I'm here," Nance said, her own voice funny-sounding. The fact surprised her somehow. She had never expected to come and now it seemed she had never intended doing anything else. Her whole life seemed to stop while she went down the line—Masters, Newsons, Ormsbys, and now Varneys.

She didn't know just what she could do to prevent Cody's mad plans from coming true, but she had to do something. She had to save Fran from an institution, save the Pecos Belle for a home, save Karoly's reckless neck.

She investigated the shower, then chose her prettiest dress. All the time she was getting ready her thoughts raced about trying to find a way to save Karoly from the anger of the people.

The soft blue crêpe she put on touched the floor all around, clung lovingly to her rounded body and slim waist, flared to her feet and revealed golden slippers. A gold ribbon tied her curls, almost lost in their brightness.

"Could I send a note to Kate Masters, Fran?" she asked, as Fran came in to inspect her idol.

"Of course. Come in here. This is Karoly's office and you can write a note on his desk. Long Tom can ride out to the ranch with it," Fran said eagerly. "I wish you never would leave. I'm glad there aren't any more letters after V, here in town, so we

can keep you until you go back East."

Nance sat down at Karoly's big desk and picked up a pen, lifting her hand for Fran to be silent. Kate would help save Karoly. Even though she was going with the young mine superintendent, Nance felt she still loved Karoly. Good or bad, a girl never got over him.

Hurriedly, she wrote the whole story of Cody's plan to Kate, adding, "Will can do a lot if he'd round up the ranchers and bring them in to stop the mob. Tell him if he will I will be ready to do anything he asks of me. He will know what I mean."

Fran dashed out to give the letter to the Indian and Nance sat still, listening, until she heard the crash of the pony's hoofs on the road. She started to rise, then sat back staring.

ABOVE THE DESK was a framed marriage certificate, for one Karoly Varney and Mary Dell. She remembered that Karoly had once told her his mother's name had been Mary Dell. Fire burned in her gray eyes.

"Darn it!" spluttered Fran, running in. "Karoly told Mrs. Montez not to expect him until to-morrow, and I wanted him to see you like that."

Nance's heart lifted. She could send Long Tom to find Karoly and tell him to stay away, that she would look after Fran. "Run and see who's hammering the knocker that way," was all she said.

Kate came hurrying across the patio and into the room. "Can I see you alone?" she asked desperately.

As he bent towards her she lifted eager, waiting lips.

Fran left the two together.

"I was in town and heard Cody rousing the people. I tried to stop him. Oh, Nance, they plan to blow up the Pecos Belle and hang Karoly. What shall we do?"

"I sent you a note. I thought you'd have a plan," Nance said, in surprise. "I haven't been home yet."

"Then go home. Get Will to rouse the ranchers and have them stop the mob. You watch for Karoly to pass if you have to watch all night, and make him hide. I'll hold off the mob until Will and his men come. They won't blow up the Pecos Belle if I'm in it," Nance said firmly. "I've a plan."

"I'll go at once. Maybe I can get him to go away with me if he sees I would be proud to go. Would you look after Fran until we could send for her? He liked me a lot once, but I know he thought I was too good for him," Kate said miserably.

"Yes, go quickly and watch for him. He said he wouldn't be back until to-morrow, so you may have to watch hours to make sure he doesn't come sooner than he planned," warned Nance.

"I'd watch years if necessary!" Kate rushed away and Fran came back.

"I heard. I couldn't help it if she talked so loud. So the darn town thinks it's going to string up Karoly, does it? And I've stopped swearing so they'd like me when Karoly got a lot of money and could mebbe work for the town," raged the child.

"Never mind, Fran, we'll save him. Kate will save him, and you and I will save the Pecos Belle," promised Nance. "Have you a picture of Karoly?"

"Sure!" Fran bounded away and returned with a picture of her brother.

Nance studied it in silence a moment, then picked up the shears from the desk. "I'll have to cut this. Go into my room and bring me the picture of me from my traveling bag." She cut the picture to the right size to fit over the one of Karoly's father and, when Fran came back with her own picture, she sacrificed that to fit over the picture of Mary Dell.

The year date on the marriage certificate had been blurred by dampness, so it might have been May 18th of any year.

"I see! I see!" chuckled Fran, as Nance replaced the glass and held up the doctored certificate. "But what good will it be?"

"I'm not sure. I can only try. Maybe they won't raze the Pecos Bell if I promise to turn it into a home. If they think I am Karoly's wife, they might think I could do it." She hung up the certificate and looked at it, color creeping into her pale face.

Karoly's pictured face seemed to mock her and she turned abruptly and left the study.

Dinner over, the housekeeper departed for town, obeying a message brought her of the serious illness of a grandchild. Nance doubted the veracity of the writer, but was glad to see the housekeeper leave.

Fran departed reluctantly for bed. "You'll call me the minute any one comes," she said firmly. "I won't be asleep." But when Nance went into her room a half hour later, she was sound asleep, worn out with all the excitement.

AS SHE SAT DOWN to wait for what might come next, some one rapped sharply on the door leading into the front part and gaming rooms.

"Let me in, Montez. It's Lettice," an authoritative voice commanded.

Nance did not answer, but went to the door and shot back the bolt which fastened out the dance-hall hostess.

She came in, pretty, assured, golden-haired, her gold lamé glittering in the lights as she moved.

"Hello. The teacher, huh? Where's Montez, the housekeeper?"

"She was called to her son's home, a child ill," Nance said carelessly.

"The yellow-backed coward, probably faked the message. Listen. You'd better take the kid and duck and run, too. The dear town is coming to blow the Pecos Belle sky high."

"I know. They mean to hang Karoly Varney, too, to his own pepper tree," Nance said quietly.

"What? Who said so?" screamed Lettice. "Cody Masters said they'd only chase him out of town."

"He lied. He told me they were going to hang him."

"The liar! And what are you, Cody Masters' girl, doing here? Spying?" Lettice asked harshly.

"No. I'm going to help if I can. I want to save the Pecos Belle for Fran. Kate Masters is going to save Karoly, get him to go away with her," Nance said, biting down hard on her trembling lip. "I've asked Will Masters to round up the ranchers and help save the place. If I'm any Masters' girl, I'm Will's," she added. "I promised him that, if he'd help."

"Well, I'm going to close up the gambling rooms and tell the dancing girls to go to their boarding houses. Karoly always meant to close up the Pecos Belle when he struck it rich and we'll do it ahead of him. And you think he'll leave with Kate Masters, that goody-goody?" Lettice's laughter was shrill. "I'm the only one on earth who can save Karoly Varney, and I'll do it for the same price as the Masters girl. I'm going where Karoly is and tell him so." Lettice swished out, her laughter following like the jeering of brassy imps.

Nance followed her, saw her shooing the frightened girls out of the place, ordering the musicians away, the gamblers out of the gaming rooms. She locked up these wings. Her possessive manner chilled Nance. Lettice knew what to do and would do it. She was Karoly's kind. Kate and Nance were outsiders, who must stand to one side.

Lettice brought the money bags and dumped them on the table. "Better take care of those for Fran. I've cleaned out the safe. Karoly and I can draw against his bank account once we are safely away, but the kid will need a stake." She was gone. Less than fifteen minutes later Nance, watching from one of the grilled windows, saw her flash by on a horse, leaning low over the horse's neck and riding hard.

She was no longer a glittering, golden bird of the night, but a boy in blue jeans, leather wind-breaker, cap pulled low.

Nance drew a sobbing breath. As far as she knew now, she and Fran were alone in the great house. Yet she did not feel afraid. Karoly would be safe; two girls, loving him, had gone to his rescue. Both meant to ask something in return. Nance, loving him, too, would help him. But he'd never know about it. She'd save his costly investment, the Pecos Belle for his sister, and whichever girl he married, would benefit indirectly.

VI.

AS SHE LEANED THERE, her cheek against the cool iron grille, there was a low murmuring which grew like the surf of a great sea, be-

came the shuffle of many feet, the sound of cautious voices.

Nance went bravely through the quiet house to the front door and flung it open, the lamplight above shining down on her amber head and blue-gowned figure.

"What is this?" she asked the sea of faces out beyond her. She chuckled. "We wondered how long it would be before you found out we were married and closing the Pecos Belle forever as a gambling house."

"What?" It rose as in one voice, a mighty question.

She leaned her head against the door and nodded, her laughter spilling out, clear and unafraid. "We did fool all of you until to-day, didn't we? It is mighty sweet of you to come as soon as you found out, and give us this huge reception. Do you mind coming in quietly so not to frighten my little sister?"

"See here, Miss Teacher, this ain't no reception. We come to get Karoly Varney and string him up to the nearest tree. We know what he's been up to, sneaking off every day to meet his gang."

Nance laughed again into their angry faces. "Gang? Aren't you the sillies?" asked her gay, chuckling voice. "Of course he sneaked off every day, but it was to go to our meeting place enough ahead of me so you folks wouldn't suspect. I was determined to finish out my school. Some of you said I never would stick it out because I was a dude. But I did. If we'd gone around in public, you wouldn't have let me stay. It would never do for the gambler and the teacher to be sweethearts openly; but now Karoly isn't going to be a gambler any longer. He is going to be a good citizen, raise his little sister—and his children." The brave voice faltered then.

Lies, lies, all lies, but the dreams that had been hers for weeks, dreams which could never come true. So she spilled them out, like so many shining pearls before swine—all her lovely, lovely dreams.

By the time they knew she had lied, Will Masters and the ranchers would be here and disperse the mob inflamed by his brother's words.

The leaders conferred. Then three stepped forward. "We'd like to see your proof, ma'am. Ain't no time you been gone from us, and the circuit rider ain't been hereabouts for a month."

"But it was when he was here before," said the brave, lying voice.

"That could be so. But you'd have something to show. If you can prove to us a teacher married a gambler and suspected bad man, we've got to believe he aims to close the Pecos Belle and become a decent citizen."

"Oh, he does, and I have. Come with me, please, all three of you, and you can tell the rest," Nance said, keeping the tremble out of her voice by great effort.

The men, awkwardly but doggedly, tramped after her down to the unlocked door, into the living rooms and to the study.

She led them straight to the desk, and held the lamp so the light fell on the framed certificate and the pictured likenesses of the teacher and the gambler.

"My name was Mary, Mary Dell. But when my father killed himself I dropped the first two letters and called myself by my mother's name," said Nance firmly. "If I hadn't, every one would have remembered who I was and I couldn't stand that."

"No, ma'am," one of the men agreed, while the one who could read spelled out the certificate for the two who couldn't. "Reckon you've squared Varney," he said admiringly.

"No feller's going to hold up a train on his wedding day. You're sure a brave little lady and we're glad you're staying. Tell that husband of yours as long as he keeps his word and uses the Pecos Belle for a home and don't make no suspicious moves, it'll be all right with the town."

"Awful slick, ain't you?" sneered the voice of Cody Masters, who had tiptoed after them. "Any of you stop to ask where her precious husband is?"

NANCE'S brave foundation, built on lies, crumbled before Cody's sneers, as he once more took the leadership of his specially organized mob. The three men of the committee turned and looked at Nance questioningly, and as she stood mute, they began to frown and look at each other.

"What's all the company, darling?" asked a sleepy voice, and Karoly Varney rose from the big wing chair, which set with its back to the room, facing the window open on the patio. He came to Nance's side. "Why didn't you wake me up when we got company?"

"It's the kind of company you won't like, Varney," said Cody, his face darkening as he saw Nance sway against the arm put protectingly around her. "The kind that brings you a present, a new necktie of hemp."

"Don't listen to him," pleaded Nance to the three. "You promised me you'd go away and let us—let us live here among you like good citizens." She looked at Cody, then turned her face and pulled away the high collar. "See, he's being hateful because I refused to marry him this afternoon. He made his brags then what he'd do. I had to slap his face and then he struck me. That's why I moved in and decided it was time the town knew the truth, even if school had another week to go."

The men looked at the dark mark on the fair cheek, then at Cody, who reddened and shifted his feet.

"The truth ain't in you," he said derisively. But his words sounded lame.

"Nor in you," Karoly said steadily, his voice cold with deadly anger. "Not ten hours ago you promised me, on your knees, that you'd leave the country for good if I'd give you time to find your sweetheart and take her with you. I come home to find you plotting against me. I tried to save you for your family's sake. If I'd known you'd come here and strike at me through my wife, I'd have killed you then."

"You hear?" Cody asked triumphantly to the three quiet men. "He'd 'a' murdered me—like his gang murdered poor Thomas—but he didn't dare. We've fooled around here long enough. Go tell the crowd to get busy!"

Cody shot toward the door, pivoted and flung himself on Karoly from the rear, before any of them guessed he did not intend going out to carry out his own orders. Karoly went to his knees, dragging Nance with him, protecting her as best he could in falling.

A shot sang from the doorway, striking Cody in the shoulder as he struggled to get his hands on Karoly's throat.

Swearing vilely, Cody came to his knees, tugging at his gun with his unhurt hand. Karoly, catlike, was already on his feet, waiting poised for Cody's next move.

"Up with those hands, you polecat!" howled the shrill voice of Fran Varney, and another shot clipped Cody's ear.

Raging, he lifted his hands, blood beginning to run from his ear and

welling out of his shoulder.

"He's a good citizen of Gun River, but he cusses worse than I ever did," said Fran, coming into the room in her white nightgown, looking not unlike a little angel gone berserk.

"Reckon we'd better get the straight of this," one of the committee said, worriedly. "The crowd's likely to get plumb restless. It's a wonder they ain't piled in here afore now."

"They won't. Will Masters is here with a bunch of ranchers and cowhands," Karoly said quietly, relieving his sister of her guns and shooing her out of the room to dress. "You'll find the crowd has dispersed. Will has other help, too—United States deputies. Reckon the shooting is bringing them," he finished, as the measured tread of heavy boots came down the corridor.

Four men entered, badges glittering on their coats, their faces stern and white. One wore a bandage about his head.

In spite of them, in the momentary confusion, Cody Masters dived head first through the window through which Karoly had quietly entered in time to help Nance out with her lying. Before they could recover from their surprise, the heavy boom of the outer door came, then the pound of iron hoofs.

"He's got a horse," one of the men said, with a groan.

"Widow Maker," Karoly's voice sounded strange in his own ears, and he ran, Nance at his heels. When he found this out he looked back shouting, "Don't let her hear——"

ONE of the men caught Nance about the waist and pressed her head against his coat. But even then she heard the wild scream of rage torn from the throat of a horse gone outlaw, when Cody started to mount him, heard the hammering of hoofs and a single, terrible cry of awful terror wrung from a human. Then there was nothing except hoofs ringing like bells on stone, and a shrill whistle repeated until the ringing ceased.

"Lord!" choked one of the deputies, entering with Karoly, his face white as paper. "That was quicker execution for the Ace of Spades than the law could 'a' given him. Your horse saved the government a lot of money, Varney. Reckon you'll be a rich man by the time the different counties and States get done sending you reward money for catching the Ace and his gang."

"Ace?" Nance opened her eyes. "You mean Cody was the Ace?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the deputy. "He was as slick a fellow as ever straddled a horse or triggered a gun. We lost him to-day when we bagged the rest with Varney's help."

"You a law man?" Nance asked Karoly, using the local term.

He shook his head, his green eyes mocking her. "Just a gambler who stumbled onto their hide-out through a clue a teacher lady give him."

"The—the Kid?" Nance asked confusedly, turning back to the deputies.

"We met up with her when we was coming here on Cody's trail. She thought we had Varney under arrest and went for us, both guns spitting death. We had to let her have it or get salivated. As it was, she got one of us plumb through the heart and split his head," said the deputy, nodding toward the bandaged one.

"Who—who was she?" asked Nance.

"Lettice," Karoly's quiet voice said.

Nance sank into a chair, white to the lips. The bright, golden bird

who had gone so recklessly to save Karoly was dead. She stole a glance at Karoly from under long, curling lashes. His face looked set and white.

The men tiptoed out.

"I made an awful mess of it, didn't I?" Nance asked tiredly. "When you had already saved yourself—or I forget, you didn't need saving."

"We might not have reached here in time to save the Pecos Belle. I understand they already had the dynamite planted when you heard them. Doesn't take more than a minute to blow up a building," Karoly said quietly.

"But how will you explain away my lying?" Nance stammered, nodding toward the open door where the lamp still burned on Karoly's desk, lighting up the doctored certificate. "And I gave them my word you'd leave the Pecos Belle closed."

"I will. I was just waiting to get money enough together to send Fran away to school until she's grown up."

Nance rose and went into the study and took down the certificate, her cheeks a painful red. "I can fix this. I didn't hurt your mother's and father's certificate."

Karoly took the certificate from her and laid it on the desk. "I'll fix it. I know you well enough to know you don't want to be in the same frame with a gambler. I've always known that. You were pretty swell to do what you did for Fran—link your name with mine before the whole town. I heard your speech as we rode in, you see."

"I've been crazy about the Pecos Belle a long time," Nance said, with dignity. "I couldn't bear to see it blown up."

"I'll deed it to you when I go."

"But you don't have to go now. You'll have money from the rewards and the people in town will fall over themselves being sorry, when they know you cleaned out the renegades," Nance reminded him.

"We can't both stay after tonight," Karoly reminded her.

"I know. But they aren't going to ask me to come back. I can't spell all the words and they've found it out, in spite of what Fran did. I wonder why, when you hate me so, you told her to watch my spelling."

"Oh, stop that!" commanded Karoly roughly. "Hate you? I've been mad about you ever since that first day you came into the street, when Fran jumped the fellow she caught palming an ace. The sun was all tangled up in your curls and a gam-

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bler's heart got all tangled up in your dimples and your cool gray eyes——"

"But you were terrible to me," whispered Nance. "You needn't lie now just to protect my good name."

"Of course I was terrible. I couldn't have a soft little city dude like you falling for a gambler the way girls seem to, so I was as devilish as I knew how to be," growled Karoly, turning away.

Nance took a step forward, caught his arm and shook it and him with it. "Look at me! Look at me, Karoly Varney, and see if it did any good!"

HE TURNED as if she had shot him, stared at her unwillingly—at the rose-flushed face and gray eyes all warm and shining at last—the cool gray eyes so many men had tried to make come alive and match her amber hair.

"You little fool dude, you," he said harshly, and gathered her into his arms. "After tearing my heart out for your little feet to trample all these weeks——" He bent his head and found her eager, waiting mouth.

At his first hesitant touch, Nance pushed back, staring at him. "But it was *you* who kissed me in the hall that night!"

"I had to have that much," he grumbled, and took up the interrupted kiss with an ardor that dispelled all doubts in Nance's mind as to the identity of the man.

"How I *will* search for the lost mine now!" Karoly exclaimed at last, his cheek against her bright hair.

"What mine?" Nance asked disinterestedly, her velvety hand caressing Karoly's cheek.

"One Long Tom told me about, that was a legend of his tribe when he was a boy. But I've looked for it in vain so far. Erosion and landslides have changed the contour of the mountains, or else the veil of water is a myth, as well as the mine," Karoly explained, making a ring for his finger of one amber curl.

"Veil of water," gasped Nance. "But there are rattlesnakes there."

"See here, teacher, you're losing your mind," teased Karoly, but there was a strange, awed look in his eyes.

"Just for that——" began Nance hotly. Then she laughed softly. "I can't even start to be mean to you any more. If your old mine is marked by a veil of water, then I know where it is. I could have told you the day Flipper bucked me off and you started back to the Masters' ranch with me."

"Go on," Karoly said, his voice ragged with feeling because this slim city girl, curled so contentedly in his arms, had brought him so much luck.

"Why he bucked me clear over a lot of bushes after he had jumped over another mess of them, and there was a clearing and a pool and a waterfall. I went through it to see what was on the other side. There was a hole in the ground and rocks piled up and a dead man. Then a rattler shook his tail at me and I ran."

"Nance, could you find it again?" Karoly could not hide his excitement now.

"Of course I can. It was such an awful experience I never can forget one step I took getting away from there. I may be a dude, but you can't lose me," boasted Nance.

Karoly caught the soft hand from his cheek and kissed it. Will Masters had done that once, but how different it was—— Will Masters —— Nance sat up, her face white.

"Oh, what have I done? I promised Will, in a letter, if he'd bring

the ranchers I'd marry him," she wailed. "He kept his promise and I've got to keep mine."

"Kate brought the ranchers. Your letter never reached him. Long Tom came right to me with it," Karoly said, with quiet triumph.

Nance was still a moment, in sheer thanksgiving, then she asked, "Where did you and Fran ride that Sunday?"

"To the next town to wire the nearest U. S. marshal I'd help him round up the Ace gang. It seemed a good time to strike while the iron was hot, after they held up the train. I never thought of being accused."

Nance flushed. "Did you shoot off Cody's hat that day he went to kiss me?"

"No. I wouldn't have stopped with his hat. It was Lettice, whom he had hidden in the rocks while he went to see who was coming. His shot took her through the shoulder. Fran and I found her and nursed her back to health. Any more questions, teacher?"

Nance loved the way he put aside the long-sought-for mine to answer her questions so patiently. She looked up at him, shaking her head.

"WELL, I'm a son of a——" began an excited, girlish voice.

"Sea cook," supplied Nance deftly, before Fran should say the forbidden word.

"Sea cook," Fran repeated obediently. "Kate Masters came with her brother Will. I had to tell them you were too busy kissing each other to talk even to me, but I didn't think you'd still be at it. There's a man here, that long-winded man who talked so long at the schoolhouse my legs went to sleep."

"The circuit rider!" exclaimed Karoly. "He knows he didn't marry us, but probably thinks we want him to. We do, don't we, Nance?"

"And the tall deputy is back. He said he had a badge for you and that you were seven kinds of a blithering idiot and worse words than that if you didn't tell the town you ran the Pecos Belle just so's you could catch the Ace gang," Fran went on excitedly, supplying the news as fast as she could, while she had their attention.

"That makes two witnesses for us —Fran and the deputy," Karoly said softly. "That's all we need. Will you, Nance, even if the deputy's idea doesn't work? The town might still suspect I was never anything but a lucky ex-gambler."

Nance put her soft palm over Karoly's lips. "Then I'll be a lucky ex-gambler's lucky wife," she said proudly.

DON'T PASS BY

THE SINGING TOWER

In the Next Issue

Sally Noon Burrell wrote it!

Feminine For Tenderfoot

—was the definition given her—until—

HELLO. I'm Angela Sherwood, your new neighbor," a soft voice was saying into the open door of the rambling log ranch house.

Nellie McClannahan took in such a long breath of air that it flooded her speech controls, as she looked down into big blue eyes that seemed to hide the delicate face and fragile figure of a young girl.

"I've taken up a homestead right next to you here," the voice went on to explain, as no answer had yet been evoked.

Nellie's controls were still flooded. Her mouth was screwing itself into a spiral of wrinkles, and her hands sought hips well-proportioned to take care of them. So this was the *guy* her men were going to shoot, poison, hang, or lynch! Homesteader spelled *sheep* to them.

"What do you mean, coming way out here, child?" Nellie finally managed.

"Oh, just the call of the wild, I guess. And I'm twenty-one or I couldn't file on land," came sweetly by way of correcting the *child* error. "I always said I was going to be a rancher—and here I am!"

Nellie could feel the steely points of three pairs of eyes stabbing her in the back. But she had to invite the little thing in, even though it meant leading her right into the battle front.

Angela didn't seem to notice the frostbitten reception as she was introduced. She turned on a smile that would have captured the heart of "Old Harry" himself, while making the deadly announcement, "Uncle Sam says I have to plow so many acres and put up so many yards of fence if I want this land for keeps. I thought perhaps I could get one of you men to help me."

Nellie noticed her eyes travel straight to Bart, make a landing, and not hurry away. He was sitting in the wide window sill—sort of in the spotlight—with long, booted legs crossed and his face turned so that his firm chin and high forehead were in full relief. It surely doesn't make a mother feel any worse toward a girl when she looks at one of her sons as much as to say, "Isn't that about the handsomest piece of humanity you ever laid eyes on!"

Of course, a lot of girls had looked at Bart that way since that little smart Aleck school-teacher went off and never even sent him a post card—after he had built a five-room house for her on his land farther up the river. The doors were locked and the windows boarded. Bart was no longer interested in land—or women. He kept on looking out of the window.

UNDER ordinary circumstances Ted, who had danced attendance upon the ladies ever since he could stand alone, would have jumped into her service before any one else could have batted an eye. For Angela was a mighty attractive girl, in a soft gray suit with a bright-blue scarf tucked in at the throat. Curls, shimmering between a gold and silver, made her clear, white skin seem al-

by Clara Perman

"But this rancher set fire to her old shack —because she prefers to live in a stone house—farther up the river——"

most transparent. But these were not ordinary circumstances.

The government had just opened up this land, and Angela had nabbed the one stretch that would be the most advantageous for sheepmen to take their herds across the North Fork River. Then they could trail them over the cattle range to the mountains for winter feeding. Once these dirty herds crossed the range, it was no longer any good for cattle. Rico Ferenzi, manager of the Calwer Brothers Sheep Co., would be given plenty to pay for the use of this strip. And he was determined to get it, regardless of price—or method.

Ted had planned to file on the land himself, add it to the McClannahan spread. That would eliminate the worst element of the sheep menace. But Ted had eighteen more months to go before he would be twenty-one. Until that time, he and "Pa" had made certain little plans that might interfere with any one else taking possession. They had watched the cabin going up next door, had seen the red roadster arrive—were ready for the enemy. But they had not seen the occupant of the car until now. Ted, realizing those plans might need to be reconstructed somewhat, glared at her.

Nellie could have smacked both of those boys as she saw Angela's smile go out.

At last Pa did have the grace to say, "Well, one of you boys will have to take grub up to the outfit on Old Windy to-morrow, but I

guess I can spare the other one for a day or two."

There was no answer.

Then Ted, who was a little quicker to take in a situation, spoke up, "I'd say not—why, there's a rattlesnake for every rock on that place." He meant to scare her out, for no cattleman had ever yet harmed a woman.

The big blue eyes widened a trifle, but Bart had unconsciously flashed a scornful look at his younger brother, and hope flickered again. Stepping nearer to the broad shoulders which blocked the window, she said airily, "He's just trying to scare me, isn't he? Does each rock have a rattling bodyguard?"

Bart drew back as if she were a snake herself, ready to wrap deadly coils about him. "Possibly not," he said. "But I'm thinking when a girl turns rancher, she'd better plan on doing her own work—even if it does spoil her pretty soft hands!"

Angela had no way of knowing that a city girl had once found this country too hard to take and, leaving it, had left Bart with a definite impression of all girls not born on the range. She looked at him with startled eyes. But she soon rose to the occasion and was quite in ascendancy as she took herself off with a parting bomb thrown in Bart's face. "Just give me time to get *hard*—unless you have the monopoly!"

Nellie gave three silent cheers. "That girl's spunk may show these stout-hearted villains a thing or two yet," she said to herself, and secretly placed her entire stake on that bet. An oracle within Nellie seldom gave her the wrong tip.

"EASY pickin's," Ted said. "A tenderfoot, nice little dudine—we'll only have to put a mouse in her pantry."

Pa looked relieved. "So—she always wanted to be a rancher," he mimicked. "Why, she'll blow away in the first windstorm!" He began to read his paper with more satisfaction than he had for some time.

"Yeah, if mom doesn't run out and grab her," Ted voiced his distrust of his mother.

"Blood's thicker'n water," said Pa in that one certain tone reserved for making significant remarks. Nellie didn't need to be told what was expected of her.

So she had to be careful not to make any friendly advances, though it was but a step to her neighbor's cabin. However, she could see everything that went on from her kitchen window.

Still clinging to his theory that a mouse in her pantry, or a similar scare, would substitute for any of his more treacherous designs, Ted brought home a big rattlesnake that he had killed one day.

"Now the next time the foreign matter across the road takes herself off," he confided, "this old boy will be coiled up on her doorstep when she returns."

"Kid stuff," said Bart.

"Shame on you, Ted McClannahan. Why, it will scare that little thing to death," scolded Nellie.

"Good! Anyway, it may give her ideas about this country."

Of course, Nellie did have to watch her step. If the girl should happen to go into cahoots with the sheepmen, it would just be too bad. So she pretended not to see Ted track for Angela's house after the homesteader drove off on Sunday afternoon. But she knew full well that a red car couldn't round that first hill and disappear into Big Hollow before she saw it on the return trip.

And no sooner had Big Hollow swallowed the vivid morsel than Nellie said casually, "That turkey hen has made a nest somewhere, and I'll bet it's in those rocks out back of her house. Here's where I try to find it while the coast's clear." And off she went, determined to be on hand when Angela caught sight of that rattler. Why, she might faint or something!

Ted had certainly done a realistic job. There the snake lay coiled, head up, ready to strike.

Angela's brakes creaked; she got out, was sprinting up toward the door, stopped suddenly—only a second. Then she went back to her car, took out a .22, leveled an eye—and Nellie was the one who almost fainted when she saw the head of that snake drop back.

Catching sight of her visitor, Angela called, "Get a gun, we've got to find his mate. I've heard they're mighty affectionate and loyal. You don't suppose she's waiting up for me inside?"

"Any one who can shoot like that doesn't need to be afraid. You sure gave me a surprise!"

"Humph! With an army captain for a father! I've been shooting guns ever since I could hold one."

Then Nellie saw Ted watching and had to scuttle for home. But after that she noticed a gun belt around Angela's small waistline—and the holsters weren't empty.

Ted and Pa exchanged contemptuous grins when they saw the enemy outfitted in full war regalia, so Nellie told them about the snake's head, and inwardly strengthened her bet on the girl.

"Accidents will happen," snorted Ted. "But she's got to learn that ranching is no snap—and the lessons are going to begin right now!"

ON THE VERY next afternoon Ted and a couple of the men had just brought the yearlings to the home corral for dipping when Nellie heard Angela calling for help. Nellie looked out the window to see about fifteen head of range cattle tramping the little patch of alfalfa now beginning to show green.

"We've got work to do here," Ted called back. "But I'll saddle a horse for you."

By that time Nellie was right on the trail of that young man. "No bronc," she ordered, "and no burs on the saddle blanket."

"Just as you say. I'll give her old Jake. Only thing wrong with him is a tough mouth and a tender hide."

Angela eyed old Jake with concern, as Ted threw on a saddle and began to cinch it. "He looks sort of harmless," she said. "But I've heard that broncs can appear mighty docile till aroused."

"Here you are," said Ted, and he threw the reins at her feet. "Perhaps I'd better lead him over to a soft spot," he said with a grimace.

Then, gingerly, she picked up the reins and clutched the horn—suddenly sprang into the saddle, dug her heels into Jake's ribs, called "Yip-i-i-i" and was away like the wind. Jake hadn't traveled that fast for the last nine years.

Nellie gave Ted a good look. "No, I didn't," he answered. "But there's a wire hanging to one stirrup that may act like a spur."

As far as Angela was concerned, the spur and Jake's tender hide were a help rather than a hindrance.

"I might have known," said Nellie to herself, "with her father an army captain—cavalry horses——" As she saw her whirl the old cow horse about and get those cattle on the chase to the range leading into the

foothills which sloped from the river, she thought, "She's no weakling for all her white skin and baby hair."

She wanted to call every one of those men to see this performance, but a galloping messenger interrupted. Sheep were coming across that stock bridge.

The men were off in a flash—were back almost as soon, much more talkative than usual. Rico Ferenzi, swarthy manager for the biggest sheep company, had been there, was stationed behind a rock with rifle aimed, ready to snipe each rider as he came through the narrow gap—and Rico was a crack shot.

Bart's red stallion was the first to make the defiant dash. At the same moment Ferenzi's rifle had fallen from his hand. Some one had managed to get around to that side already and had sent a bullet through his wrist. With their leader wounded and Bart leading the attack, the herders scattered like their sheep. Bart had a certain reputation, and it wasn't exactly healthy—for them.

But who had got that bead on Rico? They would sure pass the hat and buy him a silver-mounted saddle. Each puncher was questioned as he rode in, but not one could claim the credit. About that time old Jake came galloping into the corral and Angela was seen going into her cabin.

"I'll just bet that little mutt did it," said Nellie, puffing up like a peacock and wanting to say, "I told you so all the time." A unanimous hoot silenced her.

THE HOOT, however, gave way to some concern the next day when the men, riding in for dinner, saw Angela out at her woodpile—a great white bandage around her head. While reaching for a stick, one hand went up, felt around the cloth as if the pain were intense.

With a flying leap Bart was over the corral fence, had the girl in his arms, and was bringing her to the ranch house. "Give her some dinner, Nellie, then we must get her in to a doctor," he said, arranging his light burden on a chair as tenderly as if she were a fragile china doll.

Nellie obeyed the order with alacrity, motivated by joy rather than great worry. True, Angela's face was flushed, her eyes feverishly bright. But this only revealed that Bart's strong arms had made an impression not in the least unpleasant.

Then the wounded heroine was asked directly how the injury was incurred. Only a coy, enigmatic, little smile answered.

"She'd brag about it if she was the one," Ted whispered to Nellie. But Nellie wasn't so sure about that.

After eating a good meal for any one in a very serious condition, Angela jumped up, flung the white cloth from her head and exposed a scalp covered with—curling papers. "Thanks, Mr. Bart, for the good square meal and free taxi service," she announced with a dramatic wave of her arm.

It was so funny that everybody—except Ted—howled. Bart made a dash for her. "Why you little rapscallion—I'll make you chop wood to earn that meal." He laughed.

"Oh, well, I can," she boasted. "My hands aren't quite so soft now." And she held up little blistered hands for his inspection.

For just a moment a tender look came into his eyes, as if he wanted to take the swollen fingers into his own and kiss the bruises away. Then, suddenly, remembering that he had forgotten himself, Bart cut her off with a biting, "Be sure and

get your curls made first. We employ no one who hasn't primped for at least two hours. When your hands get as red as that stuff you have on your nails, we might consider letting you manicure the horses' hoofs." He turned on his heel and went back to the table.

For a moment Angela stood trying to grasp this sudden change. Then, she took a dollar from her pocket and threw it at him. "I can still pay my way. When I can't, I'll work my nails till they're this red with blood, before I'll ask you for help!" And she flounced out the door.

"So!" Ted was sneering at Bart. "She got shot in the head sniping sheep-herders! Curl papers! Fat chance we'll have chasing her off with you carrying her around on a pillow!"

"You don't need to worry about me," Bart said. "I'll admit she fooled me, but she didn't beguile me. Just take care of yourself. I'm surprised you've stayed away from her this long."

"Who? Me? I'd lay a brickbat over her head if she wasn't a woman."

"Oh, both of you go lay an egg," said Nellie, still certain that, curl papers or not, Angela had done that shooting.

DURING the big round-up which followed, the women were alone most of the time and did much visiting back and forth. Even afterward the habit was not broken. Angela often ran over, ignoring Ted's youthful impertinence, and not seeming to notice Pa's sidelong glances—for he didn't intend to get right hostile until she started fencing down by the bridge. But she made it a point never to appear when Bart was about.

Then, one day late in the fall, Nellie saw her putting bags into her car. Soon she was tooting her horn

"Nobody could take her homestead from her! She'd show that yellow skunk!

in front of the ranch house. "I've served enough for one term," she announced. "Have it all counted up on my fingers and toes. If I get back by midnight on the night of April 7th, I'll be in no danger of losing my rights." And, waving a gay good-by, she added, "You'll probably hear me sail in about 11:59."

"Well," said Ted, "if not getting back by midnight of April 7th will make her lose her rights, she'll not sail in at 11:59—or many hours later." He stalked into the house and put a circle around April 7th on the calendar.

"So," Nellie tried to shame him, "on April 7th our heavyweight champion will defend his title."

"This was all just a whim," said Pa. "We'll never see her again."

"One whiff of the city will cure her wild urge," was Bart's cynical comment. "She won't be back."

"You're darn right she won't be back," came forth with such finality from Ted that no one felt equal to resuming the argument.

But something inside of Nellie kept saying, "If Angela Sherwood says she's going to sail in at 11:59 on April 7th, she'll be sailing in."

When that encircled date was eventually reached, she said not a word, as Ted drove off in the family car. He wouldn't hurt the girl, she was sure of that. Still, as the hours wore on, she had to admit she was relieved when Bart got into his car and followed Ted.

At 11:55, approaching lights sent her and Pa scurrying to the door—but it wasn't Angela's roadster. It was the old McClannahan bus stopping out there in the road. So Ted had managed something, Nellie told herself, and felt a sinking feeling inside. What had he done with her?

She beat Pa out to the car to get the details, when, lo and behold, it was Angela who stepped out, her blond hair shining like silver in the moonlight.

"Your little boy Ted may be late in getting home," she said to Nellie.

"Come on over here and give an account of yourself," came the answer with mocking severity.

"Oh, no. You come over this way. I have to have one foot on my own fair land."

Flitting like a butterfly, she led them over to her land then, turning, explained, "He staged a pretty good holdup, but a black handkerchief isn't a total disguise—especially with the back of his car showing behind the rocks. After he had taken time to shoot all four tires and start his kidnaping, I decided to—let him walk!"

JUST what had happened? Had she used those guns? Angela would be the last to tell if she had——

Nellie's wonderings were broken by the sound of another car coming around the cut in the hill. It was Bart with Ted. Just how was Ted going to take this defeat?—Nellie wondered.

She wasn't long in finding out. Here he came, waving a white handkerchief straightened out between his hands. "I surrender," he said in an exaggerated meek falsetto. Then he promptly added, "Heard you had tire trouble on the road, Angela. I'll be over early in the morning to take you in and get it fixed."

The McClannahan tribe were knocked speechless by this turning of the tables. But the young lady addressed seemed to be prepared, even expecting it. "O. K., Theodore. I'll be armed to the teeth," she said. And this remark constituted the signing of the armistice.

As they walked over home Pa said, "So at last you let the petticoat win out, Ted."

"Bet your sweet life I haven't," retorted that young scapegrace. "I've merely outlined a new method of attack. If I can't win by war it will have to be by love. And, by golly, we'll add that land to our spread if I have to marry the girl!"

Nor was there any doubt as to his change of tactics. He began to take her to the country dances, order candy with the supplies. But when he broke his favorite sorrel colt and presented it to her, Nellie knew that as far as Ted was concerned he was going to make his boast good. Somehow she was sorry that the war was over.

"You'd better lay off trifling with her affections," Bart told him sharply. Bart's face had set again in that cast-iron sternness. It made Nellie doubly sure that he cared for Angela and had forgotten the teacher. It was only a crucified pride that kept him from again wearing his heart on his sleeve.

"Oh, I'm not your one-woman man," Ted returned lightly. "Why not marry her? She has money, brains, good looks——"

"—and land that you want," Bart added to the list.

"Everything but love," Nellie was saying to herself. Angela didn't love Ted. But her life in military circles had never had a dull moment, and she loved a good time. It would be hard to resist his attentions. Still, she's had plenty of experience with men, Nellie decided. She isn't going to let a youngster like Ted sweep her off her feet.

But in trying to sound her out nothing tangible came of it. "Well, one thing I'm going to have," Angela said with emphasis, "is a permanent home. I've been battered around long enough. That's why I came out here."

"Yes, but you want to be sure you know it's the right partner. Look at Bart now. That teacher thought he was O. K. while she was out here, led him on. He even built a house for her—cut every stone himself ——" Nellie checked her furious outburst. "But maybe I shouldn't tell——"

"Oh, Ted told me. I couldn't help but notice the house as we rode by, only stone one in the country. That rose-tinted native stone is lovely there among the cottonwoods." Then she changed the subject so easily, so courteously, that not the slightest offense was given—nor the slightest inkling of what she thought of either Bart or Ted.

AND it wasn't just idle curiosity on Nellie's part, either. Angela should get married. It was dangerous for her to live there alone. Rico Ferenzi had been wild since the shooting episode, made boasts that didn't sound any too good. A guard was kept at the stock bridge all the time now. But that Rico was a sly one.

It was on one of Ted's days to guard that Nellie saw sheep coming over the range. Ted had not come to give the signal, had not done any shooting to give warning. That was bad. Calling to Angela to be on the lookout, Nellie saddled a horse, got a rifle and started out.

In a trice Angela was by her side. "Go on back, child. This is no place for you," warned Nellie. But she received only a scathing look in return.

Knowing what would happen should they ride around the narrow gap, they tied their horses and

climbed the rocky hill that lay between them and the bridge. Nellie's weight interfered with her climbing. Angela sprinted ahead, reached the top. "Get down," ordered Nellie. "They'll take a pot shot at you." But Angela was crawling out to the edge of a projecting cliff so that she could see below.

Just then Nellie passed an opening made by a balancing rock, heard a big voice saying, "So they think only cattlemen can hold a necktie party!" A great roaring laugh followed.

That could be no other than Rico Ferenzi, Nellie was sure, as she craned her neck through the small opening.

One terrified look! They had Ted's head in a noose, and Rico held a quirt ready to cut the horse so that it would jump from under her boy. The quirt cracked sharply; the horse jumped, and tore up the road at lightning speed. But at the same time there came the crack of a rifle. Ted went with his horse, and a powder-smoked rope dangled from the cottonwood.

It had been a long time since Nellie had felt any tears on her cheek, and she had to wipe them off quickly, for that little go-getter was crawling back.

"We've got to make tracks," she was saying. "But I got in one good crack before they saw me."

The two sneaked down a ravine which was so perilous that it seemed safe. Angela was ahead again, and, hanging to a stunted currant bush, was making her way round a curve, when a heavy hand grabbed her gun, then seized her. "So you're the little sharpshooter they keep in the hills around here. Pretty little guerrilla, too. Much too pretty to leave in a canyon."

It was Rico. Nellie knew only too well what those words meant. It would be far better for the girl if her body were tossed into a canyon. He hadn't seen the older woman, but it was all she could do to hang to the mountainside. It was useless to think of trying to shoot.

She heard the rocks falling as he crashed down around to the other side. "Get those sheep through now," he ordered the men. Then a horse galloped madly away.

Before Nellie could turn around, the hoofs of another horse were heard—faster, more thundering. They could belong to no other animal than Bart's red stallion. Nellie felt a quickening surge of strength, clambered to a place where she could see.

Rico was turned in the saddle, emptying his gun at the oncoming rider. Bart was gaining but didn't dare to shoot for fear of killing the girl. Yet the red stallion went closer and closer into the open fire. It must have been the fighting girl in Rico's arm that destroyed his aim, for it was plain to be seen he was going to hold her to protect himself.

Nellie's knees turned to rubber; her teeth clenched so hard that they hurt. What could happen? Rico had the strength of a bull, was a crack shot, could use a knife—and he wouldn't care what happened to the girl.

THEY were far in the distance now, up the road that ran like a white ribbon for miles. Their forms became specks, but were still distinct as Nellie watched Bart make a flying leap from his horse and land on Rico's neck. The horse reared; then all was a whirling cloud of dust.

At the same time sounds of another battle were heard—on the

range. They would put these herders and their sheep to rout—but Bart down there on the road—Angela! What had ever possessed her to stand there so long! Was she in her dotage? She was not! And fairly falling down the hillside she swung into her saddle, gouged the spirited roan and made straight for the thick of the battle, to summon help.

Rocks flew as they skirted the hogback, came out to the main road—only to look out upon a peaceful valley. A cloud of dust showed that the cattlemen had finished their work and had already started for home. She could never catch them. There was no time to waste, and, clutching her rifle, she whirled the roan toward that other battling ground. Soon she saw the red stallion coming up the road. Angela was in the saddle. Broad shoulders rose above her, and long legs dangled behind.

"Is that Bart you've got under the dirt back of you?" Nellie asked her. Out in this country it wasn't ethical to show any feeling at a time like this.

Angela was quick to catch on. "Yeah, thought I'd better bring him home so his mama could wash his face and put him to bed. He'd better call it a day." She turned her face up toward him with that little smile which Nellie couldn't see how any one could resist.

And then, through the dirt, Bart actually showed a row of teeth. "You didn't do such a bad day's work yourself," he paid her tribute.

Bart's smile was no fade-out. It did things to her eyes, her face, her hair, until a halo seemed to surround her. At last Bart didn't think she was a sissy!

Some of the glow reached Nellie. Bart had found out—*at last* Bart had found out—what she had wanted him to realize! The glow spread through her whole body. Old? She felt like a schoolgirl. Her boys were safe—and her girl. Yes, *her* girl, for Bart surely wouldn't hold off now.

But even his mother, with all her intuition, couldn't account for Bart, and her spirits suffered a slow leak after she heard Angela say, "Before we reach the others I do want you to know how much I appreciate your —— It was so—you were——" Bart quickly cut her off with, "Oh, it was no more than I would have done for any woman," to let her know at once that there was no personal interest. It had a final, settled ring. One girl had made a fool of him—that was enough.

Nellie watched the halo fade—saw a tired little girl walk slowly to her cabin, not caring for the cheers that the group of men had for her, nor the high-flung words of praise that Ted would give unsparingly.

And if Ted had been the attentive lover before, he now became a devoted one. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her. She must marry him at once, he decided. It wasn't safe for her to live there alone. Rico Ferenzi's death would be avenged; more than ever the sheepmen realized the vantage point in possessing that land, would stop at nothing to get it. So, all things taken together—he'd be twenty-one in a few days, could now file himself—well, she'd just have to marry him—or else!

That "or else" was almost too much for Nellie. Ted might like Angela, but it was the land he loved. So when he dressed up one night, said he was calling on his girl and they could look for an announcement in the morning, Nellie trembled. He was so sure of himself.

SLEEP simply wouldn't come to her as she lay wondering. Angela loved Bart, she knew, had begged for his attention in a hundred little ways. But although his bitterness had left after that one day, he was always too polite, and Angela had given up. It was a lonely country for a girl, and there was no making light of the danger. Her determination, too, to have a permanent home—just *might* sway her.

She thought she heard a car drive away from the little house. Had they decided to elope? That would be Ted's harebrained idea. But Angela—Nellie still tried to trust in her good judgment.

An hour or two passed. Then she saw a light reflected in her mirror. It moved—flickering—so it couldn't be the moon. Nellie jumped up and looked out. "Bart!" she called, running by his room. "Angela's cabin is on fire!"

Had the girl refused Ted and he had done this for revenge? Nellie tried to think no son of hers could ever have done such a thing. It must have been sheepmen.

Bart had dashed ahead. "Angel! Angel!" she heard him call frantically, not realizing that he was giving away the name he alone must have called her. Slowing down to give her thumping heart a rest, Nellie watched as he got a block of wood, crashed in the bedroom window. He was starting to rush right into the flames—when Angela came from behind the house, carrying a suitcase.

Nellie stepped back a little into the shadows. With Angela and Bart between her and the flames she missed no nice detail. Bart seized Angela, held her closely to him. "You're all right? What happened?" he asked.

There was no struggle to release herself, Nellie noticed, as Angela explained, "I didn't know what this was all about till to-night. I thought all of Ted's pranks were just the regular initiation for a tenderfoot—when I found out how much this place meant to him—— Why! He even asked to marry me!"

"And you"—Bart's voice became steeled—"you couldn't marry a mere rancher!" He dropped her as if she were a hot potato.

But Angela returned steel for steel. "Why shouldn't a rancher marry a rancher? But why Ted? He's already gone into file on my land!" Then her eyes began to soften; that begging look came into them. Something about his hurt face, his pained eyes, must have made her understand why he was so afraid of himself. "But *this rancher*"—and her voice was as soft as her eyes—"set fire to her old shack—— She prefers to live in a stone house, in the trees, farther up the river."

Her eyes got bigger and bigger. Nellie made up her mind that if Bart didn't do something about that she'd turn him over her knee.

But no substitution was necessary. The way his face lighted—— "Well," said Nellie to herself, "if it takes a house afire to kindle that flame, let it burn to the ground!" And with that she turned herself about and high-tailed it for home.

NOTICE—This magazine contains new stories only. No reprints are used.

A-ridin' Double On Tin Cup

by PECOS PETE

Thet female dude, Miss Gloria,
She allus looks th' other way
When I am anywhur around——
Leastways, she does until thet day
I finds her two miles from th' ranch
A-settin' forlorn on th' ground.
Says I: "Yuh mebbe lost yore hoss?"
"He ran off home." I likes th' sound
Of her voice—most nigh tells her so.
"Waal, climb up on muh paint, Tin Cup;
He'll carry double well as not."
Without a word she vaults right up.
Plum nonchalant I speaks out then;
"Yuh'd best jest put yore two arms so,"
An' I shows her how they should go.
She catches on like I's her beau.
Now some pokes like tuh court their gals
A-spendin' an' a-showin' up
But I've found out I do right well
A-ridin' double on Tin Cup!

It's by force—not choice—that

THE LADY RETREATS

by Mary L. Garvin

FENCES are usually put up for a purpose. Sometimes it's to keep somebody in or somebody out; not infrequently, it's the neighbor's dog or his children. But occasionally, some one puts up a fence out of downright cussedness, like Jed Grimm did, and the trouble begins!

This particularly green and dewish spring morning, Cynthia Scott came out the rear door of her sprawling cottage and strode off toward the huge cow barn. A blue turtle-necked sweater hugged her from slender throat to trim waist. Brown breeches and boots completed her garb. Her hair, coppery in the sunshine, was ruffled, but was decidedly becoming at that. She was eating, with all the smacking enjoyment of a child, a big red apple.

She was about halfway across the cow lot, kicking up little clouds of dust with every step, when Gibson came out of the milk house carrying two huge pails. Gibson, who had practically been her nursemaid in the early days on her father's ranch, and who was now her foreman on this Middle West Guernsey project, was a big fellow, plenty tough-looking.

Cynthia hailed him with a flourish of the half-eaten apple.

He stopped at once and put down the pails. "Yer outa th' hay early, ain'tcha, Cinnie?" he asked, shifting the wad of tobacco in his jaw.

Cynthia nodded, swallowed a mouthful of apple. "How's everything?" she asked.

"Fine. Pride O' My Heart borned her calf this mornin' about two. Doc wuz here."

"A heifer?" asked the girl.

"Yep. Marked dang near perfect, I'd say. Wanta see 'er?"

Cynthia bit a chunk out of the apple, aimed the core at a sparrow on the fence and missed. "Did doc see the Chief before he left?" she asked.

"Yep."

Cynthia looked at him sharply.

The man shifted uneasily on his feet and squinted his eyes. "That leg's no better an' it ain't gonna be," he said, and spat into the dust.

"Did doc say that?"

"Yep."

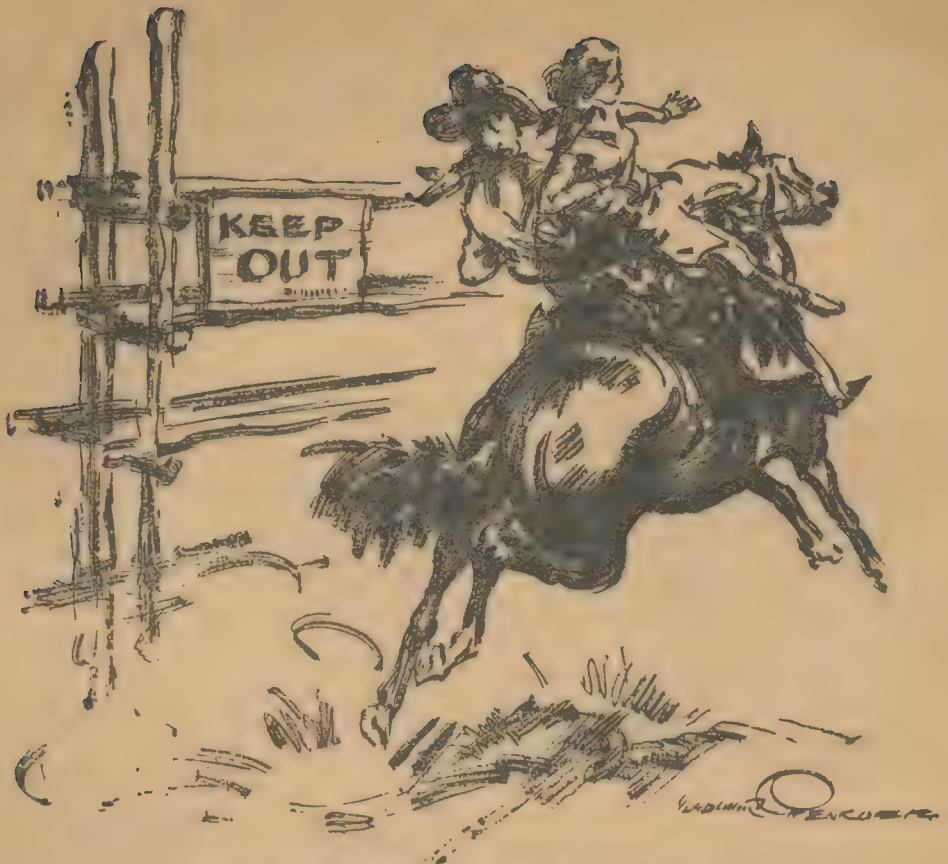
The girl frowned and caught her lip under her even white teeth. A convulsive tremor shook her throat; her eyes blinked hard. "All right," she said. "You and doc arrange it. I—I'd rather not know how or when."

For a little while there was nothing except a cheerful song from the full throat of a tiny wren perched outside her house above them.

"He can't get well, Cinnie," Gibson said at last, and he was just as full of grief as the girl. Losing the prize Guernsey herd bull was breaking the hearts of both of them.

"I know."

"Have ya thought about gettin' another one?"



Imagine! treating her like a sack of potatoes— and she'd only wanted to be neighborly——

"I might get Winslow the Fourth from Hillsdale Farm."

"Doubt if ya could, Cinnie."

"Why?"

"We-ll"—Gibson scratched his shaggy head, pushing up his battered hat—"things sorta changed o'er at Hillsdale lately. A feller name of Grimm's taken o'er the whole shebang—lock, stock an' barrel. I heard as how he's a hard feller to deal with."

Cynthia regarded Gibson steadfastly for a few seconds. "Dad always said every man has his price," she reminded him. "I'll bet I can get Grimm's bull!"

A lopsided smile spread on Gibson's weathered face. "More'n likely you'll get his goat." He chuckled.

"What's this Grimm person like?"

"Jes' like he sounds, I reckon. A tough hombre," declared Gibson. "I ain't saw 'im, but I've heard plenty! Better steer clear o' him, Cinnie."

"Getting soft, Gibbie?"

"Mebbe. But I ain't quit oilin' my .38s."

Cynthia Scott thrust her firm round chin forward. She winked at the old fellow. "We'll get his bull, Gibbie," she stated earnestly.

A LITTLE LATER, Cynthia struck off across her land toward adjoining Hillsdale Farm. The morn-

ing was conducive to meditation and so it was that she came right up to the fence before she actually saw it. She stopped short, planted a hand on each slim hip and stared at it.

As if stout woven wire and cement posts were not enough, the fence flashed such ominous warnings as: "KEEP OUT," "PRIVATE PROPERTY," "NO TRESPASSING," and "ANY PERSON CAUGHT TRESPASSING THIS PROPERTY WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW." Each and every one was signed by the order of one "JED GRIMM, OWNER."

Cynthia never wasted time making decisions. Her soft red lips set in a firm line, she grabbed a private-property sign and hoisted herself over the fence.

"Hey, you!"

Cynthia whirled, almost losing her balance, and stared at the man on horseback coming toward her from out of a grove of young maples.

"Don't 'hey' me!" she called.

He was a big young fellow, hard-muscled, not bad to look at, and ruthless-looking. The expression on his browned face, at the moment, seemed to indicate that he thought females were a severe ache in the neck.

"Can't you read those signs?" he asked.

"I don't believe in signs."

"Neither did the fellow who crashed on an S curve." He jerked a thumb toward the fence. "You'd better skadoodle back to where you came from."

Cynthia's dark eyes flashed between narrowed lids. "I'm not a child!"

"Indeed, no!" he agreed. "You are quite old enough to be arrested——"

"And quite capable of paying the fine, thank you!"

"Listen. Did you ever hear of Jed Grimm? Didn't any one ever tell you that when he puts up a sign or when he says anything——"

Her laugh checked him. "I don't believe there's such a person," she said.

"Oh, you don't?"

"No!"

"Well——"

Her long lashes flew way up; she retreated half a step; she squealed. The next thing she knew she was flat on her stomach across his horse, in front of him, and he was riding for the fence.

With no more regard than he would have had for a sack of potatoes, he dumped her over and she landed in the tall grass on her own side of the smug fence.

For a minute or so she sprawled there, unable to think or speak. Recovery, spurred by indignation, finally got the upper hand. But by that time the young man was too far away to hear what she said. She looked after him. Her slim brown fingers jerked an oak leaf from a low-hanging bow. She thrust the stem between her teeth and presently swung around toward home.

ACCORDING to the *Breeders' Gazette,* Jed Grimm lived in Oak Hill, at a rather snooty-sounding address. Sitting at her desk, Cynthia gave the journal a healthy fling, snatched up her pen, stabbed the ink bottle, and wrote:

Dear Mr. Grimm:

When I attempted to visit your farm this morning, for a strictly business reason, I met with humiliating and unwarranted treatment at the hands of one of your employees.

He was big and he was dark-complexioned and his hair was kind of wavy. He rode a black horse. I presume it is his business to watch out for trespassers, but where I came

from there's a big difference between neighbors and trespassers. Trespassers out there get shot.

It isn't my fault that my land adjoins yours, but since it seems to, we might, at least, be neighborly. Don't you think so?

My business at your place this morning was about the young bull out of Jeannette of Hillsdale, sired by Winslow the Third. I've had the misfortune to lose my herd bull and I want to buy Winslow the Fourth. Fully realizing his worth, I'll make you an offer of two thousand dollars. Naturally, I don't expect you to accept that, but what will you take?

May I have an immediate and definite answer, please?

Very truly yours,
Cynthia Scott,
Scott's Guernsey Farm.

A few minutes later she was in the kitchen, checking the supplies with her plump and pleasant housekeeper.

"Since I have to make this trip to town this morning, I thought I might as well get anything we happen to need," she explained, peering into the sugar bin.

"There's another sack of sugar in the storehouse," said Mrs. Mathews. "Here's a list of things I've jotted down from time to time. Did you aim to get the pineapple to-day?"

"I'll get a case," said Cynthia, and took the list. "Anything else you can think of?"

"Well, I was just thinking that if you had time and didn't mind, you might get those baby things I want to send to Jennie——"

"I'll get them for you. What size?"

Mrs. Mathews laughed pleasantly. "Oh, you get the very smallest for a new baby, dear!" she said.

Cynthia finished scribbling items on the grocery list, and, gathering up her coin purse and keys, went out the back door.

"Anything you want from town, Gibbie?" she shouted, as she rolled up the garage door.

"If ya ain't in sech a all-fired hurry, ya c'n bring me some smokin' and chawin'," he yelled back.

She laughed, nodded her shining head and disappeared into the garage. In a few seconds she drove out the long, expensive, canary-colored roadster, waved at Gibson and flashed down the lane between the rows of cottonwoods.

TOWARD NOON and homeward bound, Cynthia checked up. "Groceries, baby clothes, stockings, and tobacco," she mentally ticked off her purchases and finished with a flash of determination in her eyes. "And that letter is mailed to Jed Grimm, darn him!"

The powerful car slipped around curves, shot up hills, thundered across little bridges and presently she was skirting the wooded, rolling acres of Hillsdale Farm. Remembering the young man whose business seemed to be spying on people, Cynthia gave her attention to a lesser landscape and therefore did not see the big rock in the road.

The front right tire smacked its sharp edge, bounced and whistled. Cynthia stopped the car, got out and surveyed the damage.

The tire was flat, all right—plenty flat. Cynthia stared at the jagged cut in its side, considered the distance home and sighed. Talk about unlucky days!

From the rear end, she hauled out a jack and a kit of tire tools. She worked; she struggled; she perspired, and at the end of fifteen minutes she had the front axle up on the jack and staying there. At least, from where she was, under the front end of the car, it looked as if it was going to stay put this time.

"Hey, there! I can see you need help."

Cynthia wriggled, knocked her head against the bumper, and finally got up. Her soft lips pressed into a tight line.

"Not from you," she said.

Tying his black horse to a young sapling, the young man turned a little and flashed a smile in her direction. "Suit your own sweet self," he said. Strolling across the road, he sat down on the grassy bank. "I'll just sit here and watch you."

Cynthia gave him a scathing look, turned her back on him, emptied the tools out of the kit and attacked the wheel with businesslike vigor. It was a wonder that the tender young leaves thereabouts did not droop and die in the icy atmosphere.

Holding the wheel steady with one hand, she fitted the wrench on a lug nut and gave it a terrific yank. Too much! The wrench slipped off; her hand slipped down, and the two met with a smash.

"Oh-h-h!" She plopped the bruised and throbbing thumb into her mouth and sank back on her heels.

The young man didn't say a word. He just got up and went to work changing the tire.

Nursing her injured digit, Cynthia watched him. After a while, natural curiosity overcame her resentment.

"Why did you throw me over that fence?" she asked.

"You asked for it."

She pondered that, flushed a little, and tried a new approach: "I'm surprised you'd work for a man like Jed Grimm."

"What's wrong with Grimm?"

"Oh, what's wrong with any one who would put up a ridiculous fence like that and plaster it all over with horrible signs? Why, he isn't human. He's an ogre! He's a Simon Legree!"

"Think so?"

"I'll bet if you'd admit it, you're not so keen about working for him yourself," she accused.

"The wages are all right." He grinned at her and Cynthia was suddenly glad she had had the flat tire.

"How would you like to work for me?"

Busy tightening the last lug, he gave her an amused glance, and said, "I'll think it over."

As he gathered up the scattered tools, Cynthia opened the door, rearranged her bundles and boxes and slid under the steering wheel.

The man came around to her side. "Everything's all set."

Her smile was ample reward. "Don't forget what I asked you," she reminded him. "I really meant it. I think you'd like working at Scott's farm."

"You'll hear from me," he promised, and his look of amusement and understanding made Cynthia wonder, thrilled, if he had been referring to the job!

WHISTLING HAPPILY, she hopped out of the car, motioned for Gibson, and started unloading her purchases. Gibson ambled up, eyeing her knowingly.

"We-ll," he said, bending to pick up a box of groceries, "it's either a new man, a new cow or a new bonnet."

Cynthia laughed, poked a box at him. "Smarty!"

"We-ll, ain't it th' fact?"

"No talkee," she answered. "But if a great, big, good-looking brute comes around here asking for me, Gibbie, lasso an' tie him!"

As they walked toward the cottage, Gibson said, "Doc took the Chief away a little while ago."

It was a startling discovery. Why, that horrible Jed Grimm wasn't horrible at all! He was——

The words had a sobering effect on the girl. A spasm of pain crossed her clear features. "It's all—over, Gibbie?" she asked.

"I reckon by now," answered the old cattleman simply. "I didn't have no hankerin' to know how or when either, Cinnie."

Cynthia didn't say anything. She slipped an arm across his back and patted him twice. That was all.

But the day and its troubles were not yet over.

Busy at her desk, Cynthia glanced up when Mrs. Mathews came into her office that afternoon.

"I guess you forgot the things for the baby, Cynthia," said the woman.

"No, I bought them, Mattie."

Mrs. Mathews smiled apologetically. "I didn't find them with the other things," she said.

"Oh, surely——" Cynthia rose swiftly and went with Mrs. Mathews. "Maybe the package is still in the car."

But it wasn't. Nor was it in the house when they searched again there, nor in the yard.

FOR all the rain and gloom next day, Cynthia refused to be idle or disgruntled. She worked in the soft, steady rain, transplanting flowers from the basement hothouse to various boxes and plots around the cottage.

She was still working outside, pruning the wistaria to be exact, when the man brought a letter. He drove a shambles of a car and was a stranger to her, but he knew what he was supposed to do.

"I got a letter here for Miss Cynthia Scott," he said, "an' I ain't supposed to deliver it to no one else."

"I'm Cynthia Scott," she said.

"O. K., then." He handed the letter over. "I'd likely get skinned if I made any mistake."

Right then Cynthia knew the letter was from Jed Grimm. "Well, you haven't made any mistake and if he ever skins you, just come over here and I'll give you a job," she told the man.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll remember that, ma'am."

Sighing a little, Cynthia went into the house with her letter. She'd hoped that some one else would come over to-day—not to bring a letter, but, well, just to come.

Stripped of her wet clothes and wrapped in a soft robe, Cynthia curled up in the living room and opened Jed Grimm's letter.

Dear Miss Scott:

I hope this reply is fast enough and definite enough to please you: I won't sell that young bull and, besides, two thousand isn't enough.

Due to your recommendation of the young man, I am seriously thinking of raising his wages. His job is to put provocative young ladies in their proper places and help lovely young ladies change tires. But until I heard from you, I didn't know he was doing so well.

Neither is it my fault that my land adjoins yours, but since it does, can't we be more than neighbors?

Very truly yours,
Jed Grimm.

She read it four times, and the last time, something clicked far back in her mind and her face burned. Jed Grimm, of course. What a fool she'd been—offering him a job, telling him what she thought of him, Jed Grimm! Carefully, deliberately, she tore the letter into scraps and flung them into the fireplace. "Well, Mr. Grimm," she softly addressed the crackling fire, "you're in for a nice surprise."

THOUGH THE DAY had been dark and gloomy, it couldn't hold a candle to that night. There never was a blacker night, and there was still a light, steady rain. Shortly after eleven o'clock, Cynthia called the bunk house. Gibson's voice, heavy with sleep, came on the wire.

"Gibbie! Can you hear me? . . . Well, listen. *Are* you awake? . . . All right, then. Get Bill and Don and the three of you come up to the house right away. Bring the small truck and stop at the side door. Did you get that? . . . No! . . . That's right. Move fast!"

She was waiting when they drove up. Dressed in shirt, breeches and boots, a light polo coat, and topped by a soft felt hat pulled low over one eye, she stepped out into the light and motioned them back into the truck.

"What's up?" asked Gibson roughly.

"Cattle rustlin'," she replied. "Hillsdale Farm."

"Cinnie! What's wrong with ya? This ain't old Wyoming, girl!"

"He who backs out is no man!"

"All right!" sighed Gibson. "Is it th' bull or are ya rustlin' th' whole darned herd?"

There was no answer. Gibson meshed the gears and let the truck go.

"Tell me why yer doin' it, Cinnie."

"You saw that fence he put up?" she asked.

"Yep."

"He threw me over that fence, put me off his land, made a fool of me."

"I reckon I see." Gibson sighed. After a while, he asked, "What ya aimin' to do with the bull?"

"Make a fool of Jed Grimm. If I know him, he'll accuse us—me—right off of taking him. There'll be tracks, you know. But when he finds his bull it will be on his own land."

"I reckon I see."

As they turned into the tree-bordered lane which led to the barns of Hillsdale Farm, Cynthia quickly switched off the lights and told Gibson to stop the truck.

"All of you stay here," she commanded. "I can get him out alone."

And despite Gibson's protests, she did go on alone through the darkness.

Unexpectedly, the door to the huge barn was unlocked. She pocketed her flashlight and slipped quietly inside. There was warmth and the familiar smell of ensile, milk and animal heat. For a bare instant, she played a beam of light on the two long rows of stalls and sleek, fine cows. Then she made her way cautiously, in darkness, toward the doors at the end of the aisle. Noiselessly, she opened one of them and crossed the threshold.

Subdued voices and a light halted her.

"What do you think now, doc?" asked a voice, low and familiar.

Cynthia moved along the wall until she could see into that open stall, without being seen.

Doc was there—so was the man she now knew was Jed Grimm. Doc was squatting, his back toward her. Jed Grimm was on his knees in the thick straw, putting hot applications, steaming and wet, on the leg of a great, heaving, glistening animal.

Cynthia felt hysteria rising in her throat; she socked a fist into her mouth; the tears rolled down her pale cheeks. It was the Chief! The Chief!

"I don't know how you did it, Jed, but that bull is going to pull through."

Jed Grimm turned a perspiring and dirty face toward the old veterinary. He grinned. "I couldn't see him go, doc," he said. "He was worth trying to save. Once before I used hot epsom-salt compresses and saved a cow."

"If you hadn't met me this morning, he'd have been a goner——"

Stumbling blindly, weeping softly, Cynthia Scott got out of Jed Grimm's barn.

Gibson didn't ask any questions. He started the motor, backed out of the lane and drove for home.

"The—the Chief," Cynthia told him, sobbing, "is all right. He's going to—to be all right! Oh, Gibbie, Gibbie!"

The old cattleman's heart swelled with gladness; but he was wise enough to ask no questions, to wait until she would tell him the rest.

THERE WAS never a brighter morning. All the countryside was a new and brilliant green, washed clean and sweet-smelling. Outside Cynthia's bedroom window an oriole warbled, until Cynthia, seeing it, feared for its lungs.

Almost at once, she thought of the Chief and her lips and eyes softened, not so much from knowing the Chief was going to be well, but from remembering Jed Grimm bent over him, wringing steaming towels and wrapping them around the sore and swollen leg.

Mrs. Mathews opened the door and came in. "Get dressed, dear!" she whispered excitedly. "Gibson says he's lassoed and tied that young man you were expecting!"

"Not really, Mattie?" asked Cynthia in alarm. She rolled out of bed and began dressing. "For Heaven's sake, go take him away from Gibbie and bring him in the house!"

The plump lady chuckled. "Oh, he's sittin' in the parlor, all right, dear. But Gibson's guarding the front steps with a lasso in hand."

"Oh." Cynthia sighed with relief and snatched up garments from all quarters. "What would you wear, Mattie?" she queried anxiously. "I mean, do I look better in blue or tan or——"

"Put on your yellow linen, dear."

Cynthia glanced up from fastening her stockings and urged, "Go talk to him, Mattie. Do something! Don't let him go away until I get there! I'll hurry."

"I'll do my best to entertain him, but Gibson'll see that he doesn't get away!"

HE SLOWLY unwound his long legs and got up from the divan when Cynthia came into the living room. She was instantly aware of how tired he looked—the dark smudges under his eyes and the strained lines around his mouth—and her heart gave a little twist.

"I'm afraid I came over too early for you," he said.

"No! I should have been up hours ago."

As self-conscious as a schoolgirl, Cynthia couldn't think of a thing to say to ease the situation and take the formality out of it. Her wits were congealed; her manners were forgotten.

Turning a little, he took a package from the divan. "You dropped this in the road the other day. I didn't have a chance to bring it over until now."

"So, that's where I lost it!" she said, and would have taken it, except that the string gave way to three days' strain and baby clothes scattered on the rug between them.

"Oh!" Cynthia gasped.

Jed Grimm cocked an eyebrow and looked from the floor to her.

"They're for Mrs. Mathews' daughter in Ohio," she said hastily, stooping to retrieve them and hide her embarrassment.

"Oh!"

She glanced up at him. Formality vanished. They both burst out laughing and Jed helped her gather up the soft little things.

It was easy after that to curl up in a corner of the divan, facing him at the other end.

Jed looked at her with a glint of triumph in his dark eyes and said carelessly, "Do you still want to buy Winslow?"

"Why—I don't know."

"Or are you satisfied that the Chief will be able to come home in a few days?"

Cynthia stared at him in amazement. "How did you know that?"

"You've a habit of leaving a trail a mile wide," he told her, laughing, and leaned toward her to hand over the feed invoice in her name. "It dropped out of your pocket, I suppose. But what I'd like to know is what were you up to, anyway?"

Cynthia's lovely face caught some of the sparkle from her eyes. "I'll

tell you, if you'll tell me why you put up that awful fence," she bargained.

"It isn't an awful fence. It's a perfectly good, sound and substantial fence," he disagreed, grinning.

"The signs are terrible!"

"Look. When I heard I was going to live next door to a lady from the wild and woolly West, I put up that fence out of downright cussedness, to let her know I didn't want her stampeding all over my place."

"I found that out," said Cynthia.

"The lady I had in mind was not you. She was a horsy creature with whiskers, who'd be nothing except a pain in the neck."

"Well, wasn't I?"

"Not by a long shot!"

"I mean, a pain in the neck," said Cynthia.

"Oh, decidedly!"

"Well!" Cynthia stuck out her chin, but her eyes danced. "So, that's what you think of me?"

Suddenly, there was no space at all between them on the divan, and Jed was regarding her in a way that quickened her pulses. "Shall I tell you what I think of you?" he asked.

Cynthia avoided looking at him; she attempted to skirt the danger zone. "When do you think the Chief will be able to come home?" she asked a trifle breathlessly.

"The lady retreats," accused Jed, laughing softly.

Cynthia looked at him with eyes wide and starry. "Does she?" was her soft challenge.

A little later, Gibson popped in the doorway, squinted at Cynthia and Jed, and said, "I come in to tell ya, Cinnie, I can't wait no longer to lasso and tie that young feller fer ya. I gotta get to the milk house." He grinned fondly at them, shifted his wad of tobacco. "But I reckon as how I don't need to bother a'tellin' ya, anyhow. We-ll, I guess——"

Sittin' Bill

by CARMEN MALONE

"Git off muh porch, yuh tenderfoot!
Yore nothin' but a piker;
Yore Sittin' Bill from th' Sabine
But jest a sit-down striker.
Yuh couldn't stay on Minnie Maude
Much less ride ol' Sidewinder—
Th' man I marry must ride well!"
"Thet's Susy's talk—don't mind 'er,"
Says I tuh thet nice beau of hern,
But Bill got white, looked intuh space:
"I'm gonna ride thet wall-eyed cuss
An' then I'll laugh right in Sue's face!"
Waal, thet there bronc he pawed; he spinned;
He snapped; he kicked—Bill took no spill—
He took his medicine and lived
Up tuh th' name of "Sittin' Bill."
A miracle? or luck? or love?
I wouldn't be too choosy;
Th' new Miz Sittin' Bill says love—
She oughta know—she's Susy!

SECRET of the HILLS

by JANE HURRLE

RANDAL STEWART glared down at the girl stepping out of the loop of his reata. A thorn pierced one silk stocking. Tight-sticking burs sewed her skirt into grotesque bunches, and the feather on her little green *béret* was limp with a broken back. Less than five minutes had passed since she had jumped from a train for no seeming purpose but to ask, "What does a cowboy chase and seldom catch?"

She had not waited Randal's answer. Instead, she had dashed out into the New Mexican desert, leaving Randal with the amused belief that he had at last met up with a cocktail-drinking youngster who was seeing coyotes instead of the proverbial snakes.

There had seemed nothing to do but join in the imaginary chase. But Randal had scarcely put spur to his pony when he became aware that the train was pulling away from the water tower.

From then on things had happened fast. Randal had called frantically to the girl. Instead of turning back, she had darted toward a clump of cactuses that grew too close for man and horse to penetrate. With no alternative left him, Randal had sent his reata singing through the shimmering heat—straight for the little green-skirted figure.

There had been a vision of scrambled arms and legs, and as he pulled her aboard the saddle like a sack of flapjack flour, a "hell of a yell." Otherwise, she hadn't expressed her sentiments. Perhaps because she'd never before had the breath knocked out of her by a reata in the hands of a desperate cowboy.

The next few moments were a blur of dust and flying hoofs. Randal had tried to overtake the train, would have succeeded but for a bunch of turbulent curls. At the very instant he reached for the rail of the observation car, those brown curls, free of all hairpins, had bobbed before his eyes.

No wonder he was mad. In all the many trips he had made to the water tower to watch the *Limited* go by, nothing like this had ever happened—stranded miles from nowhere with a strange young miss who was now powdering her nose in the desert.

His long, lean body bent from the saddle. "We'll catch that train," he vowed, "if we have to swim the Rio Grande!"

"But I—I don't want to catch that train!"

The curl almost went out of Randal's blond lashes. "How many cocktails did you drink anyhow?"

"Oh, it wasn't cocktails!" The girl leisurely closed her vanity and tucked it in the green sweater pocket. "Haven't you ever heard of a game where you are sent out to get something and can't go back 'til you do?"

"You're telling me some one on that train sent you out to catch a coyote?"

"The last time I played it was false teeth. I got them, too—out of a dentist's show case."

Randal swung out of his saddle. "That's the damnedest game I ever

No wonder he was mad! Stranded miles from nowhere—in the midst of a desert—with a strange young miss who was calmly powdering her nose——

"Well, why the hell don't you scream?"

A Novelette

heard of!" he said. "Do you know something? You're stranded miles from nowhere with a man you've never seen before. You ought to be scared within an inch of your life!"

"You're the one who's scared," came calmly from the bright-painted lips. "As for me"—the girl's brown gaze took Randal to pieces and put him together again—"who's afraid of a big bronze he-man with steely-blue eyes and a crooked smile!"

Randal smothered a gasp. "Maybe you'll change your mind when I tell you there's not another train through here 'til morning."

"Oh, no!" There was a shrug of green-sweatered shoulders. "Nowadays the wide-open spaces are full of dude ranches."

"Hm-m-m, you wouldn't find a dude ranch within a hundred miles."

"Just the same I heard a man on the train talking about a ranch near here," the girl insisted.

"He'd be meaning the Y. L." A strange tenseness drew lines about Randal's mouth so that it looked as though a smile had never rested there.

"That's it! The Y. L.," said the girl. "They'll take me in. I'm sure they'll take me in!"

SUCH CONFIDENCE was staggering to Randal. He told her very definitely that there were three reasons why she couldn't go to the Y. L. "Ma Lane's got no use for sight-seers, coyote-chasers and—me. She'd put a bullet through my hide if I set foot on her property, maybe two if I asked her to take you in for the night."

"That's only two reasons—prompted the girl.

For answer, Randal pointed to the little feather twirling about on her *béret*. "From the looks of the weathercock on your bonnet, we're in for a blow."

"Heck, wind doesn't scare me, cowboy. Where I come from we have lots of restless atmosphere."

"Yeah," drawled Randal. "Tame ladylike winds, playing round corners of high buildings. Out here it's different. There's nothing to stop 'em. They go on a rampage. You'd be buried in sand before you reached the Y. L."

The Cinderella sport shoe ceased digging its way toward China, and for a moment the girl's bravado seemed shaken. Certainly the country in which she had proposed chasing a coyote was far from promising. Mile after mile the scenery repeated itself in sand and desert growth. Nothing relieved its flat monotony except a range of hills in the distance—hills that resembled a large gray honeycomb.

"Cliff dwellers' caves," Randal offered. "Might have been dude ranches two or three thousand years ago, but now they're just black holes in the cliffs."

A sudden gust of wind caught at the girl's skirt, whipping it about her, and inflating the little green *béret* until it looked ready to sail upward and take her with it.

"Well, what am I going to do?" she challenged, grabbing the brief head covering just in time. "You tell me!"

Randal did—and very quickly. He wanted to get it across his lips before they closed up and left him helpless beside this little piece of impudence.

"You'll spend the night with me," he growled, like a good old-fashioned villain, "in my cabin. And there won't be any women to chaperon you."

Instead of turning the desert into fertile land with her tears, as Randal had expected and somehow hoped, the girl brightened like a little bird that had found a nest.

"Thanks, Steely-blue Eyes," she chirped. "I knew you were a hero."

As Randal struck out over the sandy wastes with a nymph close in his strong, sheltering arms, he knew he was knee-deep in a situation he wouldn't have wished on his worst enemy.

IT WAS DARK when they reached the Lone Tree spread. Weary and sand-laden to the point of looking like a phantom of the desert, Randal turned Spotty loose in the corral, and staggered toward his cabin.

Never had the Lone Tree appeared so barren. Never had he realized the nakedness of brown acres whose only tree was the one for which the ranch had been named, a scraggly cottonwood some fifty yards from the house.

"Gosh, what a place to bring a girl with painted finger nails!" he thought, uncomfortably conscious of the dragging footsteps following him into the cabin.

When he had lighted a candle, he turned to look at her. All her brightness was buried under layers of sand. She was as gray as a prairie chicken.

"Scared now?" he asked, running a hand through his matted hair.

Her big dark eyes came back from a survey of the lonely room, and she raised those sand-beaded lashes.

"No, I'm not scared."

Neither did she appear frightened when she saw the room in which she was to spend the night—a barren place for one accustomed to soft beds, electricity and—a lock on her door.

"But, I would like," she said, blinking her lashes, "to give this sand back to the desert."

"There's water in the pitcher." Randal started to remove a sheet of tablet paper he had put over the top of the container that morning, a daily habit, for he hated washing in water scummed over with dust.

"Oh, so you're an artist!" the girl said, for she had caught sight of a drawing on the paper. "What is it, a cow?"

Randal smiled. "No, just something to put on a cow. It's a drawing for a new branding iron I've just cast. It's out there in the sitting room by the fireplace, if you'd like to see it."

The girl not only wished to see it, but by the time supper was ready she had used it for a poker and branded a wooden plank in the floor.

"Honest, I'm sorry," she apologized for her carelessness. "But everything's monogrammed nowadays. Why not your house as well as your handkerchief and your cow?"

AS RANDAL watched the girl getting away with the frijoles like an old-timer, he wondered about those friends who had sent her out to catch a coyote.

"Won't they be worried?" he asked.

"Plenty! But they started the game, not I."

For a moment Randal listened to the howling of the wind. Although still rattling door and window, the storm had evidently spent itself. He said, "I guess you can make that train in the morning."

The girl glanced up at Randal, a queer expression on her small, oval face. "Make that train——"

"Why not?" asked Randal. "You can't visit those cliff dwellings if that's what you're figuring on. They're fenced in. No sight-seers allowed."

"But you—don't you ever go there?" she prodded.

"Sometimes," Randal admitted reluctantly, "at night. I'd get plugged if I went in the daytime. Ma Lane thinks the caves belong to her."

"And don't they?" There was only casual interest in the question.

"Nobody knows. That's the cause of the trouble between her and me."

"Ha!" The girl's eyes began to sparkle. "I knew there would be a feud around here some place. They

always have feuds in the barren waste lands."

Randal's crooked smile got around the left-hand corner of his mouth. "I guess you got your idea of the West from moving pictures," he said. "This isn't a gun-totin' feud due to cattle rustlin'. This concerns the ownership of those cliff dwellings."

"Oh, do go on! I just love fights," the girl urged, when Randal tried to switch the subject back to her departure.

"Well, there's a treasure in one of those caves." The words were drawn out of Randal by a smile, a flash of roguish eyes and the wrinkling of a small pert nose. "At least dad believed so. Grandmother Stewart always said that was why he left the Lone Tree spread to me. He thought the caves were on this property. You can understand now why my stepmother wants it. With my Lone Tree and the Y. L., which dad left her, she'd have full legal right to the treasure." Randal paused to light a cigarette.

"Don't stop! It's thrilling, this fight between you and Mrs.—Lane."

"That's the name of her second husband," explained Randal. "He's an archæologist. They met when she was driving sight-seers out of the cliff dwellings one day. I guess she did want to put the two ranches under fence all right, for tourists can be a pest. But Grandmother Stewart accused her of other motives. Well, that started the trouble. Grandmother declared the caves belonged to me, and Martha Lane said they were hers. She went ahead and fenced 'em in. And although her husband roamed through them with his magnifying glass, hammer, and their little daughter, I was warned to keep out.

"Since then, Ma Lane has watched me fight through years of drought, depression, and disease. She knows I've had to put all but a few head of cattle under the hammer, together with horses that no longer have cowboys to ride 'em. She knows that unless something turns up for me soon——"

"So that's why you go to the caves at night," burst in the girl, "to find the treasure. Is that right?"

A smile flickered over Randal's bronzed face, but it did not relax the tension that bitter years had written on his fine features.

"If I ever find that treasure, I'll pay the woman any price to get her and her flat-heeled, speck-wearing daughter off the land! What's the matter?" For the girl had slumped in her chair.

"'Speck-wearing, flat-heeled——' Gosh, I hadn't pictured the gal that way! I thought maybe you'd be in love with her. It would have been frightfully romantic."

Randal gave a start. "Me in love with Ma Lane's daughter?" The idea brought a hard laugh from his lips.

"Well, so much for the love interest," said the girl, and chased a last bean around her plate with a determined fork. When it had gone the way of all the other frijoles, she looked up hopefully:

"I don't suppose you'd have any dill pickles or chocolate bars floating around, would you?"

"No more than I'd have an ermine coat," Randal answered. "Still, if you'd only have let me know you were coming——"

THROUGH the blue smoke that was curling from his cigarette, Randal saw a strange, unfathomable something leap into the dark eyes—only for a moment. Then it was gone, and he was again conscious of that floating-through space feeling

he had experienced out on the desert when the girl had come running to him with a cross-word puzzle in her hands. He pushed back his chair.

"You'd better get to bed," he said abruptly. "We got to strike out before dawn to make that train."

"O. K.!"

Brave—even careless, that exclamation. But Randal doubted its genuineness. There were a few things that put fear into the heart of a girl no matter how spunky she might be.

With something near to pity for this girl who had expected a dude ranch and instead got herself a lonely cabin in which to spend the night with a strange cowboy, he stepped into the bedroom and laid his six-gun on the table.

"Old stuff, Steely-blue Eyes." She smiled. "I'm not afraid of a man who rides forty miles every week just to watch a train go by."

"How—how do you know that?" gasped Randal, coming back into the sitting room.

"Oh, you're one of the sights the conductor points out to the tourists. Although you're not exactly a crumbling ruin."

The hot blood crept up over Randal's face into his blond hair. Confident, was she? Certain she could trust him? Suddenly, he knew he wanted to frighten this bewitching little devil, scare her so badly she'd never again jump off a train and seek shelter with a stranger.

Tossing his cigarette in the fireplace, he walked over to where she was standing. Very deliberately, he pulled her up into his arms.

"No, I'm not exactly a crumbling ruin," he said slowly.

The stunned look in those wide-open, velvety eyes almost robbed Randal of courage to carry through. But the girl had to be taught a lesson for her own good.

He started with her puzzled white brow, a kiss as reluctant and soft as the curls that lay against it. Then the eyes— the nose in quick succession, and suddenly his mouth, hard and firm, was on hers.

He felt a tremor go through the slender body, knew he was inviting a good hard kick on the shins. But—she lay quiet in his arms, her fresh young lips unresisting beneath the sudden ardor of his own!

Randal's senses whirled. It was a moment that seemed a century—a century that was but a moment. He dragged his lips away in a panic of emotion and stared down drunkenly into the calm brown eyes.

"Why the hell don't you scream?" he cried hoarsely. "Or—beg—for mercy?"

"Oh, should I? Cowboy, you've a lot to learn. Nowadays, a kiss is just another way of saying, 'Thanks for the buggy ride.'"

RANDAL AWOKE from dreams of the girl he had held in his arms, whose kiss had so shaken him that he had paced the floor for hours after ordering her into her room. The whole cabin was wrapped in darkness.

Whatever the sound that had waked him, another was now carried to his ears. Remembering the train that pulled away from the water tower at seven ten, Randal rose to look at his watch. He had just put a light to the candle when the outside door opened. His sleepy eyes reached across the flame he tried to shield from a gust of wind.

In the doorway stood a tall, elephantine figure. Back of the man, like a solid gray shadow, were two others who appeared to be gentlemen from their stiff-collar-bound necks

to their black derbies, but were something else again from their bow legs to their high-heeled boots.

"Sorry to disturb you, puncher," said the big man in a high, falsetto whine, "but I'm looking for a girl who got off the *Limited* yesterday afternoon."

Randal studied the dust-smeared Stetson the man wore, the faded gray suit, the brass watch chain swinging like a suspension bridge across a wide expanse of brown vest. Randal blinked his curly blond lashes.

"Excuse me for saying so, stranger," he drawled, "but you don't look like 'society' to me."

"Society?"

"Well, I took it some society friends sent her out to catch a coyote."

"Society, hell! I'm an orange grower in California, an old family friend who was sort of chaperoning her to Albuquerque." The big man's eyes swept the cabin. "She's here, I suppose?"

"Sure! Come in!" Randal could not disguise the relief he felt, for after what had happened a few hours before he knew that the sooner the girl was gone the better it would be for the condition of his heart.

But at her door, he paused. Above the moaning of the wind, he again heard the sound that had waked him, a muffled, creaking, scraping noise. He threw open the door.

It was evident the girl had been too absorbed in her efforts to pry open the window to have heard the conversation in the outer room. She whirled about, her back against the sill.

"Pretty good little actress, aren't you?" Randal said, his eyes traveling to the red lips that had lain so quiet under his kiss. "Put down your knife. You don't have to escape from me. Your friends are here." A smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "I guess you'll be right glad to see them."

The girl looked beyond Randal to the big man who, with his two companions, had edged into the doorway so that they stood just back of the cowboy.

"Hello, Jim!" she said quietly.

"My goodness, honey"—the big man's voice held the relief of a mother finding a lost child—"you gave me and the boys a bad scare." He wagged a pudgy finger reprovingly. "Don't you know the desert's no place to play parlor games? Why, if it hadn't been for a passenger seeing you talking to this cow-puncher, I wouldn't have missed you 'til we got to Albuquerque." He cast a hurried glance at his watch. "The train leaves the water tower at seven ten. Come, we ain't got a minute to lose!"

For an instant the girl studied the corpulent figure, then she said, "I'm not going to Albuquerque, Jim!" she said willfully, leaning against the window sill with her hands back of her.

Those words brought Randal up with a jerk. He reached for the little green *béret* that lay on the table. The soft femininess of it, the fragrance, the funny limp feather, sent the blood pounding through his veins.

"You sure are going with your friends!" he declared belligerently.

"You poor innocent!" the girl retorted. "Jim's not a friend. He's a villain—the kind that chews up scenery in the movies."

A loud, high-pitched laugh came from the huge man. "So that's what I get called for tryin' to deliver you safe to your dad. Come now, missy, before——"

"Stand back, Jim! All of you stand back!"

A blanket of silence fell over the four men.

"What's so funny, cowboy?" the girl asked, for Randal was undeniably smiling at the small brown hands that had come from behind that slender back. One held a revolver. The other, his own six-gun. "I'm awfully good at ducks," she told him. "Ten in a row. I got a kewpie doll for shooting ten ducks in a row."

Although she watched the big man and his companions, her words were directed to Randal.

"I guess I'll have to explain about that—coyote," she said meaningly. "Two days ago, I told Jim Barkler I was leaving San Francisco to join dad——"

"Yes," interrupted the big man. "And I'll bet he's near crazy waiting there in Albuquerque."

"Oh, dad isn't there, Jim! That was my own way of paying you back for ransacking my room."

RANDAL no longer smiled. It was slowly dawning upon him that when he had picked up this little desert hitch-hiker, he had picked up a mystery. Was she a society miss craving a thrill, or a member of an outlaw gang she had tried to outwit?

"No use denying it, Jim," she was saying. "I found your quill toothpick among the papers in my desk."

The big man gave a start of surprise. Randal saw his jaw drop as though a spring had broken, but he pulled himself together.

"You're out of your mind, child. What would I search your room for?"

"Oh, just a map I had drawn. It would help a lot to locate the cliff dweller's cave where the treasure is hidden."

The words hit Randal like a blow between the eyes. This girl—beautiful, maddening—Ma Lane's daughter? That speck-wearing, flat-heeled little devil who had made a face at him twelve years ago when she had started away to school? He stared at the girl, and slowly he began to understand why she hadn't resisted his kisses.

Anger, cold and bitter, gripped Randal. To think he had let Ma Lane's daughter play him for such a fool! The girl's voice coming to him through the silence tensed every muscle in his long, lean body.

"You see now, why I, Brownie Lane, had to throw myself on your mercy?"

Randal put back his head and laughed—a hollow, mirthless sound that turned the girl into one hundred pounds of withering contempt. "That's funny," he taunted. "Brownie Lane coming to Ran Stewart for help!"

"Help?" A little, trembling word it was on the bright, painted lips. "An Indian prayer stick would be of more help than you, Mr. Stewart!"

Randal's blue eyes met the brown ones above the leveled guns, locked with them for a long, never-to-be-forgotten moment. Then his voice struck out at the girl like a whip. "If these hijackers can get the map you've got in your sweater pocket, they're welcome to it as far as I'm concerned."

A wheezing chuckle parted Barkler's thick lips. In his enthusiasm, he took a step toward "Brownie"—and got his hat shot off. Barkler was learning that Brownie Lane could shoot something besides ten ducks in a row.

As for his two companions, they were taking no chances with this five-foot amazon whose eyes were trained along the barrel of a six-gun.

She pressed all four men back-

ward, through the doorway of the bedroom, across the main room. With her attention on those four pairs of hands reaching for the sky, she did not see Randal's foot slide backward, toward the door.

"Listen, Brownie, you damned little brat. If you try to get away with that map——"

Above Barkler's shrill voice, came a creaking noise. The door blew open with a bang, and the room was plunged in darkness.

PANDEMONIUM broke loose. Vague figures thrashed about, scrambling, bumping, swearing. As fingers clutched at moving bodies, some one bumped into the table. It went over with a crash. Then a soft thud shook the cabin. Barkler had stumbled over a chair and gone sprawling to the floor.

"A light—get a light!" he shrieked, and, "O-ow!" for some one had stepped on his hand.

Randal finally lighted the candle and helped Barkler to his feet. For a moment the big man breathed heavily, as he sucked at his crushed finger. His protruding eyes rolled in their sockets like glassy marbles. They rolled from Randal, setting the table on its legs, to the gentlemen who had lost their derbies. One was rubbing a shin, the other tucking what remained of a shirt tail into his corduroy trousers. But Brownie Lane? She had disappeared.

A terrible oath bubbled from Jim Barkler's lips, and he started for the door. But Randal stepped in front of him, opened his hand, and threw a crumpled sheet of paper on the table.

"Is that what you want?"

Barkler's rage dropped from him like a discarded garment.

"The map of the cave!" he squealed.

All three men crowded about the table for a sight of the map.

"But I can't make a damn thing out of this!" cried Barkler.

One of the swarthy gentlemen looked up from the drawing. "Why did you let the girl get away?"

"One of you buckaroos tripped me," answered Randal, reaching for his tobacco. "But I'm not worrying about the girl. Those pencil marks aren't strange to me."

The three men shot quick looks at the cowboy.

"You mean you can explain these marks to us?" purred Barkler, greed and avarice oozing from every pore of his oily skin.

"Yeah! But what would be the use? You wouldn't know a bit more than you do now. Look!" His finger traveled along a penciled line to a point where it forked into other straight lines, one of which ended in a circle. "I could say, 'turn to the left here,' or, 'the right.' But how could you tell which one of the many caves I meant?"

It didn't take Barkler long to see the logic of Randal's reasoning.

"You'll have to come along and locate the cave for me, puncher."

But Barkler's plan collapsed right at the cottonwood tree, fifty yards from the cabin. For the horses that had been ground hitched beneath its scraggly branches were gone. Again the girl had proved herself more than a match for the men who trailed her.

"We'll ride your horse," Barkler told Randal. "The boys can follow when they catch those damn broncs."

"What! Spotty carry me and a two-hundred pounder like you?" Randal laughed. "He ain't a truck horse."

Barkler wheezed and cursed the girl.

"Well, I'm not going to take any chances on the Y. L. outfit beatin' me to the treasure. You'll have to go alone, puncher. But remember, if you double-cross me, I'll riddle your carcass 'til you'll look like you'd sat on a keg of dynamite. In case you might doubt a fat man's ability——" Barkler backed away, raised his gun and shot the glowing cigarette from Randal's lips."

"After that," drawled Randal, "I

"What's so funny? I'm awfully good at ducks—can shoot ten in a row——"

just couldn't do anything but play square. What about a gun? The girl's got mine."

"You don't need a gun to locate a cave—only this map."

Randal jammed the paper into his pocket.

"What am I going to get out of this, Barkler? What's my share?"

"Plenty!" purred Jim Barkler. "Plenty!"

The wind at his back, Randal fairly flew toward the distant hills. But when he knew the darkness had blotted him and Spotty from the vigilant eyes back at his cabin, he whirled the pinto to the left.

"Spotty," he breathed, "we're puttin' our heads in a hornets' nest, but we're going to the Y. L. to find an Indian prayer stick!"

RANDAL found it in the den where he knew Arthur Lane kept all the Indian relics he had collected over a period of years. With it in his shirt, in a little narrow wooden box, he was ready to leave the room when a voice stopped him.

"What are you doing in this house, Randal Stewart?"

"Ma" Lane stood in the doorway, cold, implacable hatred mirrored in the black pin-point eyes leveled upon him.

"You might ask your daughter that—if she's here."

"And what makes you think she might be here?"

"Because she jumped off a train yesterday and sought shelter with me. That is until three men trailed her there. If she isn't here, she's hiding in one of the cliff caves."

A dry, hard laugh came from the woman's thin lips.

"Arthur!" she called. "Come here!"

Arthur came eventually—a tall, thin man in ancient lounging robe and slippers.

"You remember Randal Stewart from the Lone Tree," she addressed her husband. "He's got some cock-and-bull story about Brownie being out at the caves."

Arthur Lane stared at Randal through misty glasses, the earpieces of which had been wound with tape.

"But Brownie's in California," he murmured. "College doesn't close until next week, and she'll be there a month longer to complete her data on Indian lore."

"She's got her data," replied Randal. "Now get this straight, Ma Lane. I've no use for any of your Y. L. outfit, but I'd be pretty low-down if I didn't tell you your daughter's in danger. She's got a map of the treasure cave. I managed to trick those jaspers with a drawing of a cattle brand. But maybe even now they're on their way to the cliffs. And do you know what that means? Brownie will be facin' a killer. For that's what Jim Barkler is. A killer!"

"Jim Barkler?" Martha Lane shook her head. "Jim Barkler has been a friend of this family as long as you've been its enemy."

"That's true, young man," said Arthur Lane. "Why, he even wanted to finance Brownie through college."

"Yes," drawled Randal. "Because he knew some day she'd come across something in her learning that would be a clew to that hidden treasure. I tell you the man is a buzzard—a sidewinder. If you're so thick-headed you'll stay here and let Brownie face that murderer alone, I'm not!"

"Not so fast, Randal Stewart!" Ma Lane had drawn a six-gun from the folds of her bath robe. "You ask us to send help to my daughter who is locating a treasure you and I have

fought over for years. You lie! You came here for some other purpose."

For an instant Randal's brain spun. He held in his shirt the one thing that might make them follow him to the caves. He couldn't gamble Brownie's life, sworn enemy though she was, against a treasure which, after all, might belong to her family. His blond lashes drooped.

"You're right, Ma Lane," he said. "Thanks—for the Indian prayer stick!"

There was a crash as Randal dived through the window to the ground ten feet below.

Flame spurted through the shattered glass. But the cowboy was in the saddle. The sound of hoofbeats sent a quiver through the tall, gaunt frame of Martha Lane. For Randal's visit to the Y. L. was now but a memory.

"We must rouse the boys," quavered Arthur Lane.

Martha turned from the window. "Have you forgotten they're working cattle twenty miles from here?"

THE SUN was glowing like a gigantic ruby through an amethyst curtain of haze when Randal reached the cliff dwellings. Leaping from the saddle he looked up at those somber masses of rock that held in their bosom a treasure that had made bitter enemies of two families—a treasure that had driven a girl into the desert, with men to trail her, men determined to kill if necessary.

For a moment he wondered if Brownie had come here after all. The horse she had ridden was nowhere in sight. But then she would be clever enough to tie it a distance from the caves. He slapped his little Spotty's flank.

"Run along, old man," he whispered, "and don't come back 'til the curfew blows."

Randal turned again to the caves. In one whose wall rose straight from the ground without any offset, he glimpsed a splash of color—the little green *béret*.

He wasted no time in reaching the ladder, for at any moment Barkler and his confederates might arrive.

Brownie must have seen Randal approaching, for as his head appeared up over the floor of the cave, she met him with his six-gun and a flow of sarcasm.

"And I picked you for a hero, Steely-blue eyes!"

Randal met the words with a look of open hostility.

"Go ahead! Shoot! But the only kewpie you'll get this time will be Jim Barkler."

"You—you mean you're not with them?" the girl queried.

"Would I be likely to let Jim Barkler horn in on this treasure? Give me that gun! I'm coming up to defend what may be mine."

As Randal stepped from the ladder, the girl asked him another question, this time, timidly: "Did you go to the Y. L.?"

"Yes! But I couldn't convince your folks that you were here, needing help. I guess they'll send the Y. L. bunch after me, though, if this has anything to do with locating the treasure."

Randal took the little wooden box from his shirt.

"Oh, the prayer stick! Yes!" Brownie breathed, and her eyes were near to tears. "You did understand! You did help me to escape from Jim Barkler, didn't you?"

"Make no mistake about that!" said Randal sternly. "In helping you, I was helping myself. After all, don't forget the treasure may be on my property."

"And it may be on ours," said Brownie. "Anyway you take it, I guess we're bound to keep on fighting."

As they turned to go into the cave, they suddenly heard the ladder scraping against the rocky wall, saw the poles that extended above the floor level trembling with the weight of heavy feet.

"The buzzards!" muttered Randal. "They must have been lying in wait. Lucky they didn't spot you up here."

He risked a glance over the edge, called, "You'll be a dead man, Barkler, before you ever get to the top!"

BARKLER seemed to take Randal's words under consideration, for the steps quickly descended and voices could be heard in consultation.

"What are they doing now?" whispered Brownie, after a few moments, for the ladder poles seemed to grow before their very eyes.

"They've moved the ladder close in against the wall. But don't worry. I can stop their climbing for a while anyhow."

Randal lay flat on the floor level, wriggled to the edge.

Brownie, sensing his purpose, crouched on her knees beside him and whispered, "They're on the ladder now." And, after a moment of suspense, "They're near the top. Quick!"

Randal sent his feet crashing against the ladder. Out it swung from the cliff, paused upright, and then, to the accompaniment of yells, began swaying back and forth.

Barkler jumped from the fifth rung. But the derbied gentlemen were not so fortunate. Caught near the top, they could only cling and jabber. With a deafening crash, the clumsy, ancient stairway hit the ground.

"There goes the only ladder long enough to reach this cave," said Randal. "And your Y. L. bunch will be here before they can get it fixed."

Brownie Lane started to extend her hand to the cowboy, then changed her mind. Instead, she smiled up at him with the pertness that characterized her. "Thanks, dear enemy!" she said. "I suppose now I'll have to invite you to the —treasure hunt."

Randal kept his eyes averted from that heart-shaped face.

"Suit yourself," he said coldly. "I'm coming anyway."

A look of exasperation pouted Brownie's lips. "Can't you forget the old feud 'til we find out what's kicked up all the trouble between our families?"

"The feud, yes! But I can't forget that Ma Lane's daughter played me for a fool."

There was a fluttering of the green sweater above Brownie's heart. "That's the last thing in the world I'd——"

"I ought to do what I said I would the day you made a face at me at the water tower," cut in Randal.

"And what would that be?"

"Punch your nose!" The words themselves were a blow.

Brownie drew herself up. "Since you've waited twelve years, couldn't you postpone that elegant little gesture a few minutes longer? After all," she added impudently," if the treasure belongs to our family you might want to marry me, to save the old homestead. It's been done, you know."

Their eyes clashed, blue steel dipping into brown fire.

"Marry you?" exploded Randal. "Hell!"

"It might be!" complied Brownie. "And then again it might be some-

thing else. In the meantime, how's to try feathering our nest?"

THE CAVE into which they stepped was dank-smelling, drafty and shaped like a narrow hallway. One wall ran straight back to the dark interior. But the other jutted out so that at one place the passage was no more than two feet in width.

From the box Randal had brought her, Brownie lifted a wand of discolored wood and feathers.

"Dad always believed," she explained, forgetting her resentment in the excitement of this adventure, "that a prayer stick was connected with the treasure in some way. But not until a few days ago did I find a legend that gave me the key to the mystery. The Indians believed that as the eagle soars by its feathers, so would their own prayers ascend to Those Above by the aid of these feathers. Now—watch!"

Brownie held the prayer stick before her. Almost immediately a whiff of air loosened one of the feathers. Soaring upward, it hung for a moment in mid-air, then floated toward the back of the cave. Silently, like two under a spell, man and girl followed it.

The feather, with the gesture of a pointing finger, touched the dark, dusty wall, skimmed along for a distance of several feet then rippled downward to the floor, describing almost a perfect half of an oblong the size of a door.

Randal and Brownie leaned against the wall, pushing with a strength that excitement increased a hundredfold. But it did not give. There was no sign of a crack—no motion to indicate that the feather had pointed to a secret chamber.

Time after time they returned to the front of the cave and watched the feather repeat its performance. Each time it touched the wall at exactly the same spots. Each time the treasure seekers pitted their bodies against the barricade with no better results.

When an hour had passed, Brownie, exhausted, blew a straggling curl away from her nose and flopped against the wall.

"I'd like to swat the Hiawatha that ever started such a darn legend." She mopped her streaming, flushed little face. "If this wall is movable, my name's Laughing Water."

The words had scarcely left Brownie's lips when she and Randal were both conscious of a slight trembling against their bodies. Almost imperceptibly the wall began to move, rolling backward as though revolving on an axis. With a final inward swing, it completed a half circle. The secret of the hills lay revealed!

Even in the dim sunlight filtering through the cave, this hidden chamber sparkled. Walls, ceiling, floor—all were covered with what appeared to be lace woven of heavy gold. Everywhere great golden nuggets, like beads, clung to the lacy pattern.

"A gold mine!" cried Brownie. "I've got a gold mine!"

"You?" Randal said bluntly.

The famous feud would have renewed hostilities then and there, had not the sunlight suddenly been darkened by the shadow of a huge man.

Randal grabbed Brownie, thrust her back of the jutting wall.

Except for the shadow creeping ever nearer and the swirls of dust that preceded those stealthy feet down the narrow passage, neither Randal nor Brownie would have realized that Barkler and his men had cornered them.

Pressed tight against the jutting

wall, they waited, and finally caught the sound of Barkler's heavy tread. But it came to a quick stop, and a wheezing gasp seemed to fill the entire cave.

"Jim's sighted the gold!" whispered Brownie.

Ambushed as they were, Randal could not tell how near the men were. He dared a glance around the wall and nearly lost the top of his head.

A spine-creeping laugh floated down the passage. "Puncher, the next time you give me a map," shrilled Barkler, "don't leave the mark of your cattle brand on the floor. But I forgot"—again came the sinister laugh—"there won't be a *next* time."

THE BULLET that followed almost fulfilled Barkler's prophecy. Ricocheting from the door of the golden cave, it bounced back of the curving wall, grazed Randal's ear and finished the feather on Brownie's hat.

Randal's face was white. For an instant he gripped Brownie's shoulders.

"The damn sidewinder! Did he get you?"

Brownie shook her head. "But now you see why I wanted to escape from your cabin last night," she cried, "why I was afraid to try to make the Y. L. Look out!" she added quickly.

One of the derbied gentlemen had dashed out into the center of the cave. Dodging behind a small boulder, he started to squeeze the trigger.

Randal fired. There was a yell. The fellow whirled in his tracks—dropped. The derby rolled like a cartwheel across the cave to Randal's feet.

The other derbied killer made a dive for the boulder. Brownie's gun flamed twice, missed both times. Randal dragged her back to safety behind him, and poured shots at the boulder.

For a few moments the cave sounded as though a machine gun were in action. Dust from bullet-shattered walls filled Randal's and Brownie's eyes. Acrid smoke stung their throats.

In an intermission of firing, Randay whispered, "How many bullets have you?"

"One! And you?"

"One," Randal admitted reluctantly.

Brownie covered her eyes with her hands. Randal heard her saying, "Oh, mother, dad, send the boys before it's too late!"

The terrible silence that engulfed the cave was almost worse than the firing. It held an ominous meaning for both man and girl.

Suddenly, as though the sight of the gold had turned his brain, the derbied gentleman darted from behind the boulder, pouring lead at the jutting wall as he tried to make his way to the treasure. Halfway to the coveted spot, his legs buckled beneath him. He sprawled in the dust, two red holes in his forehead. A questioning look shot between Randal and Brownie. They had fired simultaneously. Their guns were—empty!

"It's a fight to the finish!" said Randal between clenched teeth. "I've got to get that dead jasper's gun!"

"No!" sobbed Brownie, and her arms were clinging about Randal's neck. "No! Jim will kill you!"

Randal stared down into those imploring eyes. They were misty with a strange emotion that struck at the very core of his being.

"I got you into this mess. If you go out there, I'm going with you. Oh, Randal, I—I love you! Even when I made a face at you—you were my hero!"

Randal called upon all the bitter memories of those hate-filled years. He tried to see in that heart-shaped face lifted to his a resemblance to the implacable Martha Lane. But his heart turned over within him. He could not deny the call of his whole being for this girl who at one moment could sass him and the next go out to face death at his side.

He crushed her in his arms.

"Lord!" he breathed brokenly. "I can't hate you, Brownie! All I want is to live to love you!"

For one intense moment he held her. Then, tearing her arms loose, he punched her in the nose.

And none too soon. As he propped Brownie against the side of the cave, the toe of Barkler's heavy boot appeared around the curving wall.

RANDAL threw himself forward. Caught those elephantine legs. Barkler went down with a jar that shook the cave.

Over and over the two men rolled in the choking dust, Randal's right hand sunk in the fat neck, his left reaching for the gun that was spattering the walls with lead.

For all of Barkler's appearance of soft, flabby flesh, he had the strength of an ox. He threw Randal off, and again squeezed the trigger of his six-gun.

The bullet went through Randal's sleeve. Again Randal tackled him and once more carried him to the floor. But a hot, sticky fluid had begun to run down Randal's arm into his hand, so that the fat neck slipped out of his hold. He struck out time after time. But his blows had no effect. They bounced off the man as if he were a rubber ball.

Little by little Randal became more conscious of that sticky sleeve and the numbness inside it. It had dragged across Barkler's face until he resembled a hideous, grinning gargoyle.

While the men were clawing at each other, Brownie dazedly struggled to her feet. For a moment she stood clinging to the wall, her eyes sweeping the cave for something to end this savage fight.

Suddenly, a cry escaped her. She darted toward the front of the cave. But not quick enough. Barkler had twisted free of Randal's grip. He whipped up his gun to fire at her.

Randal's fist shot out. The bullet buried itself in the wall.

"Get back, Brownie!" Randal yelled, lunging for the gun.

Unable to dislodge the weapon from Barkler's fingers, he could only try to keep it from pouring its lead into his own body. But loss of blood had begun to weaken him. He tried to find the man's neck, but his arm—his fingers were numb, useless.

Moments dragged into centuries as he watched the gun in that fat hand being turned upon him. At so close a range, Barkler could not miss him. And yet Randal felt no fear for himself, only for Brownie. His last thought before the bullet struck was of her.

Still clinging to Barkler, he began to slip to the floor. He knew no pain, was conscious only of a terrible numbness, of Brownie's little heart-shaped face streaked with tears.

Then a strange thing happened. Randal felt a shudder pass through that human hulk to which he clung, felt it relax. In a daze, he looked up.

Martha Lane, grim and tight-

lipped, stood in the entrance of the cave, a smoking six-gun in her hand.

WHAT HAPPENED after that, Randal did not know. When he came to, his arm was in a bandage that boasted old-fashioned embroidery, Ma Lane's figure looking thinner than ever.

"Randal," she said in a voice strangely human, "Brownie has told me everything. I've been a hard woman. Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive?" Randal smiled wanly. "Why, you saved my life. I've nothing to forgive."

But Martha Lane glanced toward the golden chamber. "Arthur has just found an inscription in there. The caves are on *your* land, Randal. You're—very rich. I hope that will make up for all the bitter years."

"That's fine! I'm sure glad the caves belong to me. You see, Mrs. Lane, I'd like to exchange them for" —Randal glanced at Brownie, who was putting a layer of powder over a smudge on her nose—"for a treasure I want a lot more than gold."

Martha Lane looked as though she thought Randal Stewart had lost his mind. Then a glimmer of understanding flashed in her eyes. She held out her hand. "They're both yours, I hope, boy."

With those words she turned toward the golden cave.

"You've got a nerve," declared Brownie, slipping down by Randal's side. "You never told me a thing about another treasure."

"Maybe I—I ought to speak to your dad first——"

Brownie sent a look at the archæologist, who was down on his knees with hammer and magnifying glass.

"I wouldn't if I were you," she said. "You see, dad's back in the year 500. I'm not born yet."

Randal, with a happy laugh, caught Brownie to him. With a long, brown finger he gently touched the pert nose he had punched. "Forgive me?" he asked softly.

Brownie lifted her lips. "What do you think, Steely-blue Eyes?"

TH' WIDDER AN' "WIMENPROOF" WALT

by PECOS PETE

"Waal, Pete," says Walt, th' Bar 4 boss,
"I've gone an' done it now f'r shore;
Muh nickname may be Wimenproof
But I ain't wearin' it no more.
I'm gonna wed come Saturd'y."
"Thet widder with brown curls?" says I.
"How come yuh change yore mind s'quick?"
"Pink!" Walt allows. "Jes' pink—purt' nigh
Th' color of th' sunset sky.
One day I passes by her shack
An' she is standin' in th' door;
She's wearin' pink—an' I looks back!
Next day I gets a closer view——
It sets me wonderin' how th' stuff
Thet dress is made out of would feel.
Thet night I goes ag'in—shore 'nuf
It feels th' way I thinks it will.
Then somehow I forgets tuh think!
Pete, if yuh want tuh stay unwed
Beware of gals a-wearin' pink!"

Dear Editor:

Here comes a Canadian girl from the beautiful sunset province of B. C. I am a constant reader of your magazine and consider it tops. I am a girl five feet four and one half inches tall and I weigh one hundred and twenty-eight pounds. I have wavy brown hair and brown eyes. I am fond of riding, swimming and dancing, but have no particular hobbies. I am sixteen and my birthday is June 3rd. Have I a twin? I will be expecting a lot of letters, so please, friends, don't disappoint me.—Martha Etyer, Savona, B. C.

Dear Editor:

Do you think you could find some one for me who will write, exchange snapshots and be a real friend? I have often wondered what boys and girls were doing in other parts of the country and I hope to find out something about them through the Pony Express.

I am fifteen years old, have brown hair and brown eyes and am five feet two inches tall. I like all sorts of sports, especially swimming, dancing and horseback riding. Please write to me, for I am sure I can be a real friend to any one.—Rosemary La Grand, Herculaneum, Missouri.

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of twenty-two. I have large gray eyes, dark-brown curly hair and a sunny disposition. I am five feet three and one half inches tall and weigh one hundred and fifteen pounds. I love all sports and am crazy about dancing. I also like the movies and go real often.

I would like to hear from friends from everywhere, especially cowboys and cowgirls. To those who send me snaps of themselves, I will return the compliment. I promise to be a faithful correspondent, so get busy and sling some ink my way.—Edith Lawson, R. R. #1, Meadows of Dan, Virginia.

Dear Editor:

I am fifteen years old, five feet one and one half inches tall, have brownish-red hair and dark-brown eyes. My hobbies are horseback riding, singing, dancing, and all outdoor sports. I keep house for my mother and two brothers.

I would like to hear from pen friends of all ages and from every part of the world, especially those from the West and Hawaii. I will answer all letters that are written to me. Here's hoping for lots of pen friends.—Phyllis Kern, 2902 Cherokee Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

Dear Editor:

Could a young British soldier find a place in your magazine?

I am twenty-one years old, five feet nine inches tall, have black hair and blue, smiling Irish eyes.

I should like to hear from friends from every State in America and, of course, from friends in any other part of the world.

I promise to answer all letters received and will exchange snapshots.—

Pvt. W. O'Brien, 2819664, 1st Batt., The Seaforth Hds., Murray Barracks, Hong Kong, China.

Dear Editor:

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again?"

I am hoping this, my second attempt to get into the Pony Express, is more successful than my first was.

I am sixteen years old, have light brown hair and blue eyes. I am fond of all sports, especially swimming.

I have traveled quite a lot in the Eastern States—especially Florida and New York—and can tell you almost anything you would like to know about them.

Come on, boys and girls from all over the world, won't you please write to a pen friend who will promise to answer all letters?—Janice Davies, 530 Maple Avenue, Newport, Kentucky.

Dear Editor:

Well, the marines have landed and the situation is not what it is cracked up to be, unless you put my call for pen friends in your magazine.

I am twenty-two years of age, six feet two and weigh a hundred and eighty-five pounds. I like all kinds of sports and like to receive letters and write them, too.

I have been around quite a bit, due to the fact I am on the *U. S. S. Quincy*, which was over in Spain when the trouble started.

Come on, pen friends, let's get together and do a lot of writing. There are never too many letters that I cannot handle.—Trevor V. Howells, Marine Detachment, U. S S. Quincy, c/o Postmaster, San Pedro, California.

Dear Editor:

I hope you will consider this a sincere plea!

I want to find four or five real pen friends. I will endeavor to answer them and in an interesting, wholesome way, make worthwhile corresponding friends.

I am twenty-nine years old and would like to write to ladies between twenty-two and thirty.

I certainly would appreciate your printing this, Mr. Editor. Thank you!—George Stevenson, 510 Colorado Avenue, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Dear Editor:

Since I have started reading your magazine, I must say that your stories can't be beaten.

Now I must say something about myself. I am an Indian, eighteen years old, with black hair and brown eyes. I weigh one hundred and eleven pounds and stand five feet ten and one half inches.

I would like to hear from girls all over the world between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. Boys, too. From Alec. —Mr. Alec, c/o Marlows, Ltd., Motor Department, Renwick Road, Suva, Fiji.

Dear Editor:

Could you find space in the Pony Express for a lonely young man of twenty-three? I am six feet and one inch tall, weigh one hundred and seventy-five pounds.

My profession is flying. I have my own airport and my own ship. I am looking for young girls with flying ability to write to.—Speed Gilbert, Trona, California.

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you have room on the Pony Express for a lonely South Carolinian?

I am seventeen (at least almost so), five feet three inches tall, have light brown wavy hair and large brown eyes. Some people have even said I am attractive. Isn't that a miracle? I almost forgot! I weigh one hundred and fifteen pounds.

I have had many exciting adventures which I'll tell or rather write to every one who writes to me.

One day last summer an old man told us about a quantity of gold and silver being buried in the location of our home during the Civil War. It was buried so that the Yankees couldn't get it. A few days later my brother found an old gold coin. After this, Daddy had the place literally dug up trying to find the two chests.

One Sunday morning my brother went out to our backyard and picked up an iron prong. It had been stuck in the earth

to see if there was anything below. As he picked it up, a colored yard hand said, "Don't pick that up on Sunday or you'll have bad luck!" Heedlessly, Joseph stuck it in the ground. Instead of piercing the ground, it pierced into his foot! It was nothing serious.

After many days of digging they found a wooden chest, long and narrow. But instead of a treasure chest, it was an Indian coffin! We had discovered an Indian burial ground.

To all who write to me I'll send a real honest-to-goodness Indian arrowhead! I could write a million or so adventures—all true.

Aiken is the queen of winter resorts. Millionaires and billionaires make this their winter playground.

I will exchange snapshots with every one. Come on, boys and girls from fifteen to twenty-five, write to a lonely Southern girl.—Sylvia Efron, P. O. Box 303, Aiken, South Carolina.

Dear Editor:

At last I am endeavoring to try my luck with the Pony Express. With your help I think I should succeed.

I am eighteen years old, medium build, have dark hair and blue eyes. I would particularly like to correspond with a few girls—lovely girls preferred.

I play the sax, piano and trumpet quite decently. My hobbies involve all sports, from push penny to water polo.

Come along, girls, here's daring you to write. I warrant you will not regret it—opportunity only comes once you know.—Douglas Brooks, c/o James E. Turner, 2 Cross Street, Bury, Lancashire, England.

Dear Editor:

Who will take me for a pen friend? I am sixteen years old, have brown hair, blue eyes, weigh one hundred and eleven pounds and am five feet four inches tall.

I like dancing, swimming, riding horseback and boxing. I am a very lonely guy. I hope you will put this letter in the Pony Express.—James Hoffman, 2238 Gaine Street, St. Louis City, Missouri.

Dear Editor:

I sincerely hope that this letter will find a place in the Pony Express, as I would like very much to correspond with other readers from all parts of the U. S. A. and foreign countries.

Even though I live in a fairly large city, there are times when I get pretty lonesome. I sincerely believe that a few pen friends would help matters a great deal. Anyway, I hope that you will give me the chance to find out by publishing this letter in the Pony Express.

I am a young man, twenty-six years of age, five feet nine and one half inches tall and tip the scales at one hundred and forty-two pounds.

I have black hair and blue eyes. I am Irish and English. As to whether I'm good looking and handsome or what have you—I'll let my correspondents judge that for themselves. I will send a photograph to every one who writes to me, especially those sending me one of themselves.

I am especially interested in hearing from young ladies between nineteen and twenty-six. I promise to answer every letter received, even though I have to lay off work a couple of days to do it—Robert G. Hale, Box 1923, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Dear Editor:

I enjoy the Pony Express department that you conduct in each issue. Although I am not any more lonely than the average individual, I enjoy making new contacts and getting acquainted with new people.

Through the facilities that your department offers, I have made several of these contacts and have enjoyed writing to the people I have met in this manner. Consequently, I propose to have you print a letter requesting more friends. Would you be so kind?

I am a brown-haired, blue-eyed girl, not yet twenty and am about five feet four or five inches tall. I am quite versatile and will be able to correspond intelligently about almost any topic, sport, hobby or ambition.

My sister would also like to receive some letters. She is a few years older than I am and about the same height and weight. However, she is by far the better looking.

She prefers tall, dark fellows. I'll take anything, but would like to receive snapshots.

I hope you'll hear my double plea and

help me all you can by publishing my letter. My name is Virginia and my sister's is Vickie.—Virginia Steltz, 48 Broadway, Kingston, New York.

Dear Editor:

I'm a girl.
I've dark brown hair and eyes,
A medium complexion, too
And of medium size
And love to write—I do.
I'm 'most seventeen,
Have I got a twin?
My birthday is,
Now don't forget,
September twenty-fifth.
Now, I suggest you get a pen,
Boys and girls,
And write in to—Maria Baldassano, 2236 Clifton Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Dear Editor:

Here is a lonesome boy from the dear old Lone Star State.

I am seventeen years of age, weigh one hundred and thirty pounds, have gray eyes and brown hair, stand five feet eight and one half inches.

I live on a ranch. I can sing and play the guitar a little. I sure do get lonesome, as I don't go to school.

I would like pen friends between the ages of fourteen and seventeen—girls especially.

To the first four I will send snapshots, but will answer all letters.—Vernon Lee Greer, Dripping Springs, Texas.

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely New Zealand girl, nineteen years old, five feet four inches tall, have wavy reddish-brown hair, brown eyes and a fair complexion.

I am interested in all topics and outdoor sports. I promise to answer all letters promptly and would love to exchange snapshots with any one willing to correspond.

Come on, all you boys in the wild and woolly West and in foreign countries, please don't disappoint me.—Myra Breck, 775 Gladstone Road, Gisborne, New Zealand.

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely girl of seventeen who lives way, way down South.

I have long black curly hair and brown eyes. I am five feet three inches tall and weigh one hundred and eight pounds.

I was elected yell leader for this coming football season.

My hobbies are football, dancing, swimming, tennis and collecting snapshots. Come on and be my friends and write to me. I will gladly exchange snapshots.—Sharon Dawn, 3524 Pineridge Street, Houston, Texas.

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely aviator attached to the *U. S. S. Northampton*, way out here in Long Beach, California.

I would like to have pen friends from anywhere in the United States. I will exchange snapshots and answer all letters.

I am six feet one and weigh one hundred and eighty-five pounds. Have dark curly hair, blue eyes and ruddy complexion. I am considered good looking.

Come on, girls, give a lonely bird a break.—J. E. Ray, *U. S. S. Northampton*, Long Beach, California.

Dear Editor:

I am seventeen years old, five feet ten inches tall and weigh one hundred and forty pounds.

I would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world. I guarantee to answer every letter I receive.

I am interested in stamps and photography and will be able to exchange both stamps and photos.—Frank Teague, Amberley, North Canterbury, New Zealand.

Dear Editor:

This is my first effort to try to crash the Pony Express. Have you, by any chance, a place aboard your Pony Express for a young girl in her 'teens?

As I said before, I am a girl in my 'teens with dark brown hair, blue eyes and stand five feet one inch tall.

I am interested in all sports, both indoor and outdoor.

I hail from St. Catherines, Ontario, the fruit-growing center of the North.

I was born in Toronto, but raised in St. Catharines. I am very lonely so would like to secure a pen friend.

Be a friend to a lonely maiden in distress and answer my plea! It doesn't matter about age or size.—Marguerite Heaman, 35 Raymond Street, St. Catharines, Ontario.

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely Australian girl, fifteen years of age. I have blond hair and hazel eyes.

I love all sports, especially riding, swimming and cricket.

I would like to correspond with some cowboy from sixteen to twenty years of age. Come on, some one, write to a lonely Australian girl.—Betty Heatley, Collins Creek Road, Kyogle, New South Wales, Australia.

Dear Editor:

As an interested reader of your magazine, I would be obliged if you would insert my request for pen friends, preferably from dwellers of the range land, Canada, Texas, Arizona or Nevada.

I am five feet four inches tall, twenty-three years old, have brown hair and blue-gray eyes.

I am interested in reading, singing and cowboy films.

Thanking you and wishing you continued success—Marion Murphy, 6 Shrewsbury Road, Tallsbridge, Dublin, Ireland.

Dear Editor:

Won't some lonely boys and girls write to me? I am twenty-three years old and have brown hair and eyes.

I'd like to hear from some lonely cowboys, as well as other pen friends.

Here's hoping my mail box will be swamped with mail in the very near future.—Alice Freitas, 3240 San Leandro Street, Oakland, California.

Dear Editor:

I am eighteen years old and have graduated from high school. I am five feet ten inches tall, weigh one hundred and forty pounds and am considered to be handsome.

I have black wavy hair, gray eyes and a fair complexion.

I am quite active in sports and like them all. Dancing is my favorite form of recreation. Although I like to dance so well, I have plenty of time to write.

Come on and let me hear from some of you.—James Whitsett, 320 Montrose Avenue, Akron, Ohio.

Dear Editor:

I would like to have some girls to write to—if you can get me some.

I prefer girls from sixteen to twenty, especially those from the country, villages, etc.

I am a young man, twenty-two years old and six feet tall. I have dark hair. I am fond of music, dancing, motoring and young ladies. I collect stamps, snapshots and postcards.

Drop me a line. I'll have a special gift for the first ten who write.—Ken Manning, 35 Wonford Road, Exeter 6, Devonshire, England.

Dear Editor:

I am sixteen years old, have brown eyes and brown curly hair. I am five feet two inches tall and weigh one hundred and two pounds. My hobby is writing stories.

I like all sports, especially dancing. I would like to hear from boys and girls in the wild and woolly West. I will answer letters from city folks, too. I'll exchange snapshots. Come on, cowboys and cowgirls, sling some ink my way.—Mildred Weaver, 100 Main Street, Irwin, Pennsylvania.

We acknowledge letters from the following:

Goldia Angel	William Knivton
Robert Arbogast	Esther Lewis
Dorothy Barnes	Knight M. Lucas
Phyllis Beaumont	Marvella Mae
Frank Brennan	Clara Marenger
Mayne Bryers	Fred L. Mason
A. S. Burns	Eric Masters
Elsie Carpenter	Eileen McCormack
Mae Ruth Cooper	Thora Mennim
Vera Crough	Geraldine Miller
Florence Daigneault	Joyce Mills
Bobbie Edgley	Edith Needham
Lawrence Garrett	Victoria Notrangelo
Doris Gilbraith	James Payne
Reginald Giles	Sherry Piche
Dorothy Girard	Miss McFay Pierce
Elma Patsy Goerts	Wilbur Pike
Irene Grisley	John E. Poloney
Mabel Harris	Pauline Remeta
Frances Hawk	Frances Sahota
Louise Hester	Peggy Schatz
Marion Hodge	Patricia Seary
Ruth Huffman	Leo Seeger
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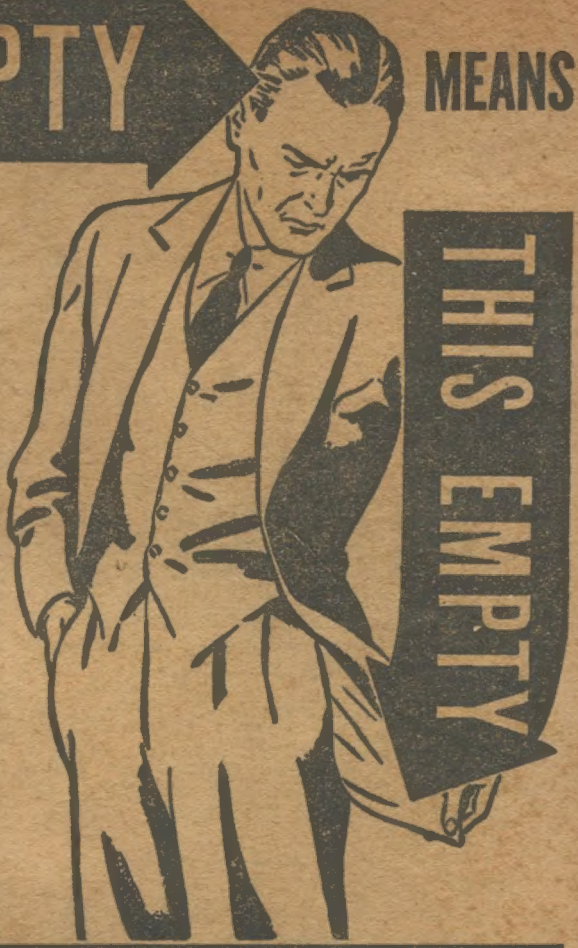

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